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THE GREAT ALTERNATIVE,  
*AND OTHER SERMONS.*



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# THE GREAT ALTERNATIVE,

*AND OTHER SERMONS.*

BY THE REV.

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*Kensington.*

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I.

*THE GREAT ALTERNATIVE.*

"He that believeth on Him is not condemned : but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."— ST. JOHN iii. 18, 19.

## I.

### *THE GREAT ALTERNATIVE.*

WE live, brethren, in a time when the claims of Christianity are keenly canvassed. Our old creeds are being taken to pieces, and each article subjected to a rigorous, unsparing examination. The day is swiftly passing when a law, a custom, an institution, or a document may claim exemption from being handled simply because it is old. That ancient and almost superstitious awe which restrained men from touching any heirloom bequeathed by their fathers is giving way. A new test is being applied. Nothing must be suffered to exist which does not vindicate its right to do so. It must stand or fall on its own special merits.

This test, so freely used in all secular affairs, is brought to bear, not only on existing Church organizations, but on the whole body of Christian truth. Nor have we any reason to wish it should be otherwise. If there be anything in our venerable creeds which should not be there, let it go; if Christianity cannot stand on its own merits, let it fall. But there is no fear of its failing to survive the ordeal. And it is well that its dogmas should sometimes be thrown into the crucible of discussion. It awakens and stimulates the dormant activity of the Church. It directs an increased amount of attention to the matters in dispute. It defines more

clearly that precious deposit committed by her Lord to the Church's custody. It enables her to hold it in more assured and firm conviction, and cling to it with more intelligent grasp. In short, just as persecution waged against the Church's membership has always resulted in her increased purity and strength, so a general attack on the articles of her faith has always issued in their complete and triumphant vindication. But while alleging that the upshot of this critical investigation of Christianity will certainly be to its benefit, no one can fail to see it is attended with grave and pressing dangers. It presupposes a condition of things somewhat hostile to a hearty, vigorous faith—a condition of things in which much is thrown open to question, and what was supposed to be incontrovertibly settled made again to stand on its defence. In consequence of this, many gladly jump to the conclusion that there is nothing fixed in Christianity at all; that it is a variable, fluctuating quantity, utterly beyond our powers of definition; and that the proper intellectual attitude to assume in regard to it is one of suspense. With such, of course, anything like determinate belief is held to be impracticable. They consider that it cannot with fairness be expected. Objections eagerly caught up, because others have made or suggested them, are paraded as unanswerable. And all who are desirous of finding some plausible excuse for evading obedience to the Gospel of Christ can easily do so. I am afraid I am not guilty of being uncharitable when I say that three-fourths of our prevalent scepticism is of this shallow and superficial kind. Men who have a dislike to the deep moral crisis involved in submission to Christ, who shrink from His pure precepts, and the rigorous excision from their hearts



and lives of much that finds a place there, allege that their brains are puzzled about some mystery of the faith. They conceal from others, and perhaps from themselves, the true cause of their impenitence, and take refuge behind an apology which they know will be received with a certain amount of forbearance, but which, nevertheless, is only a pretence. Now, Christianity demands faith, that is to say acceptance at the hands of every man to whom it comes. It does so *because* it comes with due Divine testimonials—testimonials that have gathered weight with every year of its history, and are crowded with the corroborations of all who have put them to the proof. He out of whom it springs died and rose again. It asks you to believe Him, His words, His message, because He died, not merely a martyr's death, but died to save you, and give you a personal proof of His strong, invincible love ; because, moreover, He rose again, and ever lives to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him. Nor does it ever lower that demand. It never says its lustre may be dimmed so much by discussion that men may warrantably stand in doubt of it. It never says that in certain stages of its development it will be satisfied with less than a cordial reception. At all times, equally, it commends itself to the conscience of every one who does not wilfully close himself against it, coming with a certain self-evidencing, self-attesting power, sufficient to win an entrance to the heart. And to deny it this entrance it treats as the gravest possible offence. To refuse to embrace Him to whom it testifies, and from whom it draws all its living energy and force, is a sin so terrible, and so wasting in its consequences, that no other can compare with it. It determines a man's destiny for ever.

Let us consider, then, this sin of unbelief, and the two reasons, furnished by my text, for its being made the ground of condemnation.

I. First of all, in regard to the sin itself, you will notice how entirely everything is made to hinge on the fact of a man's believing or his not believing. The difference between these two is all the difference between condemnation and acquittal. And though it is true that those characteristics which distinguish a Christian from an unconverted man are many and various, cropping up through the whole surface of his life, and penetrating into its deepest recesses, yet it is also true that they may be all run up and gathered into this one specific, comprehensive characteristic, that he believes in Christ. Doubtless, it was well for Nicodemus, during whose interview with our Lord the statement of my text was uttered, that the issue should be narrowed to so definite a point. It was well he should know that however far he might be inclined to go in his acknowledgment of Jesus, nothing short of personal trust in Him as his Messiah would suffice. He might be disposed to yield Him deference as a teacher sent from God; he might be willing to rank Him with those ancient prophets through whose inspired lips God had spoken to His people. But this was less than enough. Jesus held a place which had never been shared by any before, a place so altogether exceptional and unique that a man's treatment of Him was followed by equally unique and exceptional consequences. "He that believeth on Him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already."

It is well for us, too, who live in a time when many of the characteristics of the age of Nicodemus reappear, that this sharp alternative should be pressed upon us.

Christianity is not to be resolved into light and sweetness. It is not merely an impalpable essence, that spreads itself through society, raising its general moral temperature, and importing into it a certain improved flavour and aroma, but utterly incapable of being condensed into a substantial corporeity. Nor is it enough, to make a man a Christian, that he accepts, in a general way, the teaching of Scripture, and seeks to bring his life into accord with the Divine commands. There must be something much more precise and radical than this. There needs an uprooting of the life out of its old soil, a transplanting of it into new conditions, the committal of your whole nature into the hands of a Divine Person, out of whose deep inexhaustible being it shall henceforward draw its succour and support. And if this be wanting, then all is wanting. You may indeed succeed in discharging your conduct of everything openly out of joint with the profession of the Christian faith. There may be nothing in it either glaringly excessive or glaringly defective. It may square and fit in with the general standard of propriety, and betray nothing you could fix upon, as throwing it out of communion with the Christian Church; but if it be not rooted in a personal Saviour it is condemned already. Whatever your connection with Christianity may have done for you, if it has failed to connect you with Him it has failed of the one thing it seeks to accomplish. It may have begotten within you anxious thoughts and surmises about its mysteries. It may have induced you to work round its cardinal truths, and look into their meaning and significance. It may have aroused stirrings of conscience. It may have smitten you with convictions of sin. It may have bowed your soul with spiritual travail. But if you

have constructed out of such inward experience a ground of hope for your heart to rest upon ; if you have not passed through and beyond it, to Him to 'whom the Spirit within it was striving to lead you ; if your convictions of guilt have not persuaded you to have recourse to the great Pardoner and Purifier of sinners, then they have failed of their mark. He that believeth not, whether he be serious or careless, whether he be the profane scoffer or the regular church-goer, is condemned already.

Notice particularly, I pray you, the force of that word *already*. You will observe that the verse in which it occurs is, in a sense, a justification of the one that precedes. Our Lord had just said that the purpose of His mission into the world was not to condemn it, but that the world through Him should be saved. And then He goes on to show how His coming fulfilled these two ends. First, positively, He came to save, and so he that believeth on Him is not condemned. Second, negatively, He did not come to condemn, because he that believeth not is condemned already, not because of His coming, but because he chooses to abide in his sin. Out of Christ, then, every one's case is hopeless, and cannot be determined or remedied by his own efforts. Sentence is not suspended till it be seen whether you succeed in attaining a certain pitch of moral excellence or fall below it. It is not unfixed and unsettled till the end of your life, and then for the first time shaped into a verdict. Then it will only be revealed and made manifest. Then it will only be pronounced and read aloud from the page of that book on which it now stands recorded. *Already* you are condemned if you do not believe in the only-begotten Son. *Already* you are exposed to all that that condemnation involves, to the



action of its terrible, its pitiless severity, to its woeful consignment to the outer and endless darkness. I beseech you, Brethren, to beware, you who think it a matter of such trifling importance whether or not you obey the summons of Christ's Gospel, who postpone it to a passing pleasure or the pressure of some enticing temptation. Know you the risk you run? Know you the awful possibilities you are daring to brave? You are condemned already. Will you venture to abide in so perilous a state? Will you go about with a careless step, and slumber with an easy heart, when you are walking on the edge of a bottomless abyss, or resting on some steep decline that slopes down to its sheer descent? Is not the very thought enough to "murder sleep," and rob daylight of its brightness, and steal the sweetness out of every cup, and poison the springs of joy? Is it not enough to make you start at the rustle of a leaf, and to fill the thunder with the voice of God's anger, and make all the world vocal with the mutterings of His displeasure? Ponder, I pray you, those awful words which close this solemn chapter of St. John's Evangel—words which I almost hesitate to utter, and whose dreadful fulness of meaning I dare not pretend to fathom—words that must remain shrouded in unapproachable, unutterable mystery, till the day declare them: "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God *abideth* on him."

II. I pass on now to consider why unbelief should be made the ground of condemnation. Two reasons are given.

(1) The first is, because it involves rejection of the only-begotten Son of God. He came, as we have seen, not to condemn men, but to save men who were condemned already. And His coming was not one of a

number of similar expedients, that had been tried before. It was not a mere link in a chain of redemptive acts, that had been going on from the beginning, and will go on to the end. It had no parallel in the ages preceding it. It has had none in those that have followed. Peerless, and without rival, it stands as the one grand saving act of God, that knows no fellow ; and Christ Himself stands as the one solitary ladder, that reaches out of our guilty earth into the pure heavens above. He is the Only-begotten. To Him alone has the Godhead given birth ; in Him alone does its fulness dwell : so that there is no other Saviour, no other through whom God lays hold of you, no other in grasping whom you lay hold of God. To reject Him, then, is to reject the only possible means of escape from a doomed state. It is to remain separate and apart from God, that is, in a condition of death and condemnation. Now, there is only one excuse that can be urged for refusing to avail yourself of this means of deliverance which God has placed within your reach. If you could prove that it was not trustworthy, or not so trustworthy as to warrant your staking immortal interests upon it, then you might be entitled to reject it. But this you cannot do. It is the Son of God who has worked out our salvation for us. It is this fact of His Godhead that fills His atonement with piacular power, and makes His blood sufficient to cleanse from all sin. It is this same fact that endows Him with such strength of deliverance that He is able to save to the uttermost. If you can find any juncture of circumstances so strong as to defy omnipotence, then you may doubt Him. If you can find any will superior to His, ruling the affairs of men, and throwing them into adverse and hostile conditions, perilous to your

salvation, then you may stand aloof from Him. If you can find any sin, or ingrained force of habit, which He cannot conquer and break, then you may hesitate to appeal to Him for help. But the fact of His Divine Sonship precludes all this. There is no obstacle too great for Him to surmount, no danger so extreme that He cannot deliver you from it. And if you fancy your life has become embedded in surroundings from which on hand can rescue it, or your heart hopelessly enthralled by dominant lusts, or your soul stained with sins too crimson to be ever washed out, then remember the complete disproof of this lies in the Divinity of Jesus Christ. If He is God nothing can possibly lie beyond His power of achievement. He can invade your prison-house, and set you free. He can burst the fetters that hold you in bondage. His death is a propitiation for the whole world. And it is because of all this, that you are commanded to trust Him. It is when in spite of all this a man refuses to trust Him, and to believe His Father's testimony concerning Him, that the wrath of God *abideth* on him. He is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.

It is important to notice here the turn that takes place at this point in our Lord's reasoning. Having alleged that His coming was not to condemn men, seeing that those who did not believe Him were condemned already, we might have expected that He would go on to say they were condemned because they remained in their original guilt; but instead of this, He lays the whole stress of their condemnation on their unbelief. Nor is this without significance. He wishes to bring out the personal responsibility of each individual. The *unbeliever* is condemned, not because he is involved in

the sinfulness that is common to humanity, but because of his unbelief; that is to say, not because of his sharing a guilt which was brought upon him by the offence of another, but in virtue of his own deliberate deed—because he hath not believed. It has been a matter of conscious choice with him. He has had the alternative placed before him, and he has preferred to be without Christ and perish, rather than take refuge in His grace. Now, this is true of every unbeliever. He is not a man who has had no dealings with Christ, and who has never trusted Him, simply because he has never had anything to do with Him. Every one who has heard the Gospel, and knows the import of its message, *has* had to do with Christ. All of you, my brethren, down to the youngest, have had to do with Him. And if you are not receiving and trusting Him you are choosing to reject Him. The child who turns with distaste from His message, and finds other themes pleasanter and more congenial, knows that he is excluding Him from his heart. Still more does a man know when he rejects Him. With him it becomes a more deliberate and determined act, and much clearer to his own consciousness. He knows better what he is about. He has broader notions of duty. He knows more perfectly what Christ is, and what is the *result* of refusing His offer. Then when he does refuse Him it is generally in favour of some other competitor for his affections, so different in kind that the very contrast puts the fact beyond a doubt. It is, therefore, because of this wilful putting away from Him of the only and all-sufficient provision which God has made for His salvation, that the unbeliever is lost. He is condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.

(2) The second reason specified for the condemnation attached to unbelief is, that it involves the greatest immorality. It is a very common impression that unbelief leaves a man no worse than it found him. Other sins may render him an object of suspicion. Untruthfulness may strip his statements of credibility. Fraud may exclude him from the dealings of honourable men. Excess in eating or drinking may brutalize him, and make him an unsteady customer in business. But he may be as good for all practical purposes whether he believes or not. That is a matter confined to the sphere of opinion, and need not affect his actions, to any appreciable extent. In short, the distinction between a Christian and an unregenerate man, it is argued, when confined to so narrow a point, virtually disappears. It is a mere affair of creed, and who can say a man is any worse than his neighbour because he rejects a dogma which the other receives? Now, doubtless, there are numbers of professing Christians in all our churches whose Christianity does consist solely in their adherence to certain articles in a creed. They rank themselves among Christ's disciples because they hold, in a sort of way, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Divinity of Jesus, or some other fundamental orthodox tenet. And these do not affect, to any discoverable extent, their hopes, the motives of their activity, or the supreme aim of their lives. But such persons are not Christians more than in name. A creed does not make a Christian, unless it be wedded to a life. And a true believer in Christ is different from other men by a vast difference, a difference that works through his whole nature, turning it in a new direction, and

shaping it to a new end. Do not suppose that to believe in Him is a mere act of the intellect, and nothing more. If that were all you might do so or not do so, and the effects would never extend beyond your intellect, just as one may not be a whit the worse because he rejects some purely scientific or formal truth. Faith is not a mere assent to certain propositions. It is an act of the whole moral nature, closing with Christ for moral and spiritual ends. The great purpose of His coming was, not to lodge a few novel notions in men's heads, but to regenerate their hearts; not to reform, but to renew. You cannot look at Him apart from this His purpose. It is so dominant in Him, so clearly transparent through His words, His life, and His death, it is only by a wilful obliquity of vision that you can fail to see it. And if you detach it from Him, and view Him apart from this His purpose, the Christ that so remains will be your own Christ, not the Christ of God. A teacher, a prophet He may be, a Redeemer, a Saviour never. In coming to Him, then, you come that He may achieve within you that for which He came to you. You come that you may be pardoned and purified, that He may impart peace to your conscience, and touch you with the living power of His quickening Spirit. And when you refuse to come it is because you object to this process of renewal. You will not suffer Him to make you like Himself, and purge out of you everything wherein you differ from Him. And why is this, but that He is distasteful to you, that you are averse to that kind of character which He wears; in short, that you prefer to be like yourself, rather than to be like Him? Now, He is



God, the express image of His Father's Person, making visible to men the beauty of His Father's holiness, and the very features of His face. And in refusing to be like Him you refuse to be like God, you show your deliberate preference for the evil that He hates. So that unbelief is the most terrible of all sins, the sin in which the innermost, deepest aversion of the heart to God comes to a head and acts. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Yes, light has come, and Christ is the Light. He is the touchstone of the human heart. In His presence all that is best and worst in it comes to light—the worst only to avoid His face and flee farther into darkness; the best to open out under His blessed cherishing, as the chalice of the flower turns and opens to the sun. Brethren, how stands it with you? What think ye of Christ? I do not ask you if you never have any relentings of soul concerning Him. I do not ask you if the story of His cross never draws a tribute of admiration from your lips. I do not ask you if you have never had any inclinations towards Him, any movements of desire after His fellowship. All this you may have had, or may have, yet you may come short. For notwithstanding it all, you may love the darkness rather than the light. Having some sort of instinctive turning towards the Christ, do you still *rather* turn away from Him? Having looked upon the light, and having looked also upon the darkness, and having wished that you might live in the sunshine, but wished also still more that you might abide in the shadow of some pet sin, or of some habit of self-

righteousness, have you turned away, away from Christ, away from God, away from hope? Then do not disguise the reason from your eyes. Do not set it down to a mere exercise of intellect. Do not plead as your excuse that you have some objection to the doctrines of the faith, some difficulty about those thousand things where you always will find difficulties, if you choose to look for them. The reason is plain. It was given by Him who loved us as never man loved, who laid down His life to redeem us, who uses sharp, incisive, awful words, only that we may know the truth plainly, and take refuge in the fulness and freeness of His grace. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men have loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

II.

*THE APPROACHABLENESS OF CHRIST.*

“Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.”—ST. LUKE xv. 1, 2.

## II.

### *THE APPROACHABLENESS OF CHRIST.*

YOU must have been struck, in reading the Gospels, with what I must call, for want of a better word, the approachableness of Christ. Of course I mean by this not only that He was easy of access, so that any one might speak to, or see Him, but that He made Himself available, with all His resources, for every one who chose to come to Him. You rarely find any man, however great his benevolence or power to help, who does not make his assistance dependent on certain conditions. In some respects you must adapt yourself to him. You must go through certain preliminaries; you must apply in proper form. As a general rule, the more effectual the relief he has to give, the more difficult it is to get. The best education, the best legal advice, the best medical attendance are only to be had by those who have most money at command, their very preciousness making them the more inaccessible. Hence it is that those who have few wants find them most easily supplied; but those whose wants are deep, painful, perpetually recurring—*i.e.* those who need assistance most—are often most hopelessly excluded from it. Now, this rule is entirely set aside in the ministry of Christ.

He could do more for men than any who had ever come before Him, yet He never insisted on the fulfilment of a single condition. He never turned away an applicant because he lacked something which he ought to have had, or was distinguished by characteristics which were uncongenial or unpleasant. His power to help moved out to meet every one with equal readiness. There was no partiality or one-sidedness in Him. For once men found that the very greatest blessings could be had at the least cost, that what was the most precious was also the most free.

There were two classes to whom it may seem Christ acted according to a different rule. The Twelve Disciples were His particular friends. He selected them, as we should say, with the most scrupulous care. He admitted them to a privacy quite unique. He spent upon them an exceptional amount of time and of pains, making them, in a special sense, the depositaries of His teaching, and also of His power. But then He did this not simply for their own sakes. What He gave to them was not withdrawn from anybody else, so that some suffered and were worse off because they received it. They were chosen to keep what otherwise might have been lost, and dispense it afterwards for the comfort of the world. They were trustees for humanity at large, executors under the New Testament of Jesus Christ, appointed to administer the good estate of the Kingdom of God. The other class were the scribes and Pharisees—hypocrites. Them He rebuked and repelled, opening upon them the burden of His woes. But this was not because He was less willing to help them than to help the Twelve, but just because they refused to be helped, and did their best to hinder Him in helping others. They came to Him, not to receive

anything at His hands, for they did not believe He had anything to give, but to hamper and obstruct Him in doing good. They shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, for they neither went in themselves nor suffered them that were entering to go in. All who came to Him for *succour*, no matter how they came or what they wanted, He invariably helped. If more was given to some than to others, it was because they wished and asked for more. If some obtained different things from others, it was because they required them. If any failed to receive so much as they might, or as He had promised to bestow, the reason was not reluctance on His part, but unwillingness on theirs. "They would not come to Him that they might have life." He distributed Himself to each according to his want. He made Himself a Friend so far as He could, His friendship being checked, not by a restraint imposed from within, but by the strength of the resistance applied from without.

I need not quote instances from the several Evangelists to prove the point which I am trying to enforce. You remember the vast variety of cases that came under the treatment of Jesus, and with what readiness and completeness He disposed of them all. The timid Nicodemus was no less welcome than the eager friends of the palsied man who stripped off the roof to find access to His presence. The woman who was a sinner was as tenderly forgiven as the Israelite indeed, in whom was no guile, was effectually cured of his doubt. The poor woman wasted with her issue, and the poor beggar that sat by the way-side, were as much to Him as the rich Zacchæus or the young man who had great possessions. His sympathy never showed want of fulness, and was never subject to ebb or flow.



He never betrayed dulness of response to any application, nor the slightest disposition to discourage some in comparison with others. His ministry, indeed, was just an illustration of His own words: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"—*i.e.* I will supply you with precisely what you need, the absence of which makes you uneasy and renders contentment an impossible thing. I think we sometimes forget the complete concord that subsists between this great invitation and promise of Christ and the character of His whole life. Men often make promises in their best moments which are far in advance of their ordinary practice. In some mood of penitence, or high aspiration, or unwonted tenderness they give utterance to words which at other times they would hardly have spoken. Their life becomes thenceforward a continual struggle to keep up to the level of their promises, and but for these would almost certainly move on a lower plane. If you wish them on some pressing emergency to prove equal to their word, you feel it is only by urging it that you are likely to succeed. It alone stands between you and their failure to fulfil it. It alone binds them to implement its terms. We are tempted to think of the great promises of Christ in a somewhat similar way. We consider them expressions of an exceptional emotion of generosity and kindness, rather than as declaring the invariable posture and disposition of His will, and we fancy we must overcome a measure of reluctance on His side by an appeal to His promise, and induce Him to grant what His feelings might otherwise incline Him to withhold. The truth is, however, that were we to expunge from the Gospels every universal invitation and promise of Jesus, the grand truth which

these embody would still survive. His life, His practice, His whole procedure would speak to us exactly as *they* do. We should still find that the only adequate description of the character and purpose of His ministry was contained in such words as these: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out."

This truth, then, of the approachableness of Christ, the freeness with which He opened Himself to every needy and suffering soul, is not of subordinate importance, but of the very essence of His Gospel. It rests on the constitution of His Person. It is necessitated by the very fact of His being what He is, the man Christ Jesus, and by His having come to do what He declared to be the object of His mission.

I. First of all, it rests upon the fact of His humanity. Sometimes we fail to see a truth clearly, owing to the inadequacy of language to give it accurate expression. This is all the more likely when the truth in question is very comprehensive, and stands in intimate connection with others which are dependent upon it. In this case a partial statement or a loose phraseology may throw much into confusion, or even into total obscurity. Our words may become a convenient formula, standing for certain hazy and indefinite ideas, instead of rendering a thought we have clearly made out for ourselves. There are no truths which have suffered so much in this way as those which we call theological, partly because they are more difficult to understand, and partly because we are naturally indisposed to consider them with earnestness. And yet it is certain that all spiritual growth depends on a deeper insight into the meaning of God's Word, and especially into the Person and work of Christ.

Now, what do we mean when we speak of His human nature? We think of Him as a man, and because each man is distinct from every other, we think of Him also as being distinguished from all others very much in the same way in which we ourselves are. But what makes us differ from our neighbours is the possession of some quality or characteristic which they have not. Over and above the humanity which we all have in common, we each have certain leanings or inclinations which do not exist in precisely the same proportions in anybody else. Sometimes these become so strongly pronounced as to draw into themselves all the strength of our nature, and our manhood is sacrificed or starved to feed some favourite taste or ambition. It is possible to be so much of an artist or a scholar, so much of a trader or a politician, as to think more of the claims of art or learning, or business or politics, than of the claims of humanity. It is possible to let these fall so low in our practical regard, and to encourage so habitually our selfish tendencies, as to think little or nothing of a man as such, but only in so far as he happens to be of our party or of our way of thinking. And even though we stop far short of this, there is none of us who has not a bias of some sort, some kind of peculiarity that marks him off from the rest of his fellows. It is the presence of this that leads us to associate with some rather than with others. It is this that begets partialities, that eventually groups men into clubs and coteries, and makes it absolutely impossible for any one to be equally in sympathy with all. Now, when we think of the human nature of Christ we necessarily think of Him as a man. But we are very apt to go a step farther, and invest Him with those preferences which we see to be inseparable from

every other man; that is to say, we admit in words that He is sinless, yet we ascribe to Him that bias or one-sidedness which the reception of sin has produced within ourselves. But this was precisely what Christ had not. He assumed our human nature pure and simple, the humanity which is common to us all; but He did not assume any of its distortions, or those idiosyncrasies into which it runs and works itself up in every other person. This truth we express when we say that He became not *a* man, but *man*. It is the truth which is enshrined in His self-imposed name, Son of man, a name which reminds us He became not what any one of us is, as distinguished from any other, but what we all are as the descendants of Adam.

In virtue, then, of His becoming man, Christ has brought Himself equally near to us all. He is related in exactly the same degree to every one, and to every one He *belongs* exactly to the same extent. None has a prior or special claim upon Him, and when you come to Him you come with precisely the same recommendation which every one has had, and with the same certainty of success. He cannot reject you, any more than He could have rejected them, and the reception of every sinner who has ever been saved is an infallible assurance that He will save you. Perhaps you say that you have sins which invest your case with a certain degree of singularity. And no doubt this is true. The sins which every one commits take a particular colour and hue from his own character and circumstances. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to *his own way*." But this has nothing whatever to do with your relation to Christ or your prospect of assistance from Him. When a physician is appointed to a particular parish

he is obliged to attend to every sick person within its bounds who chooses to apply to him. It makes no difference whether the applicant labours under one disease or ten, whether he has been ill a long or a short time. It is quite sufficient if he live within the district and be in need of help. So Christ in becoming Son of man made Himself responsible for the wants of humanity. He undertook to answer every demand that any should present. And all you have to make out, in order to succeed in your errand to Him, is the fact of your being also a man. It is this that binds Him to you, and constitutes the tie between you. It is this that gives you a right to expect His help, and not any degree either of good or evil that may happen to be yours. And if you come to Him you may be quite sure His help will not be refused. Has He ever been known to reject a single soul? Did He ever make any one's sin a reason for withholding grace, or treat a man less kindly or lovingly because he was more piteously smitten with its leprosy? Did He not show that the more sin a man had, and came to Him to be helped against, the more thoroughly He took his side, and declared against it? Be quite sure Christ is for you, and against your sin. Be quite sure that if you come to Him now He will help you at once. Turn to Him just as you are, and where you are, and you will find Him at hand. Lay hold of Him as yours, and He will not refuse to acknowledge your claim. It may be quite impossible for you, so far as you can see, to resist the accumulated force of habit, to turn round and be something quite different from all you have been for ten, or twenty, or forty years, to conquer in the future what has conquered you in the past, to part company with

what has clung to you all your life, and entered into every thought, and encompassed you with an impenetrable coating of spiritual death ; but you will change your mind if you lay hold of Christ. He will make the impossible turn out to be possible. He will do for you what you never could have done for yourself. The man who has wandered from his track in thick darkness may sit down hopelessly and give up everything for lost, but a lightning flash may show him the path a few yards off, or a friendly shelter where all will be well. Will you not believe that Christ may make such a difference to you ? Why will you travel on with a heavy cheerless heart, stealing fitful moments of deceptive joy, knowing your whole life is undermined by an appalling danger, which at any moment may swallow it up, and resigning yourself to doubt, or the fatal conclusion that it cannot be helped, when Christ is near you, when "the Day-spring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" ? Be persuaded of Christ's love for you, His quenchless, strong, omnipotent love. Trust Him, and He will save you. He will stand by you in every strait. He will war with you against your sin to the very last. He hates it so heartily that He will watch against its wiles and anticipate its stratagems. He will bring to bear against it the whole force of His Godhead. He will lift you up gently when you fall, and comfort you when you mourn. He will not suffer it to have dominion over you. He will break it, and crush it, and bruise Satan under your feet. He will do exceeding abundantly, above all you ask or think, till He brings you to victory and perfect rest.

II. The second ground on which the approachable-



ness of Christ rests is the declared purpose of His mission. In the words of St. John that is described as follows: "God sent His only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him." "He loved us, and sent His Son to be the Propitiation for our sins." He Himself said, "God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Apart then, altogether, from the question whether Christ would have come if men had not sinned, we see quite plainly that as a matter of fact His coming was identified with a saving purpose. To put it in another way, the reason why He lived and died as He did was simply that He might take hold of us and deliver us from death. He is not, then, a God who *happens* to be a Saviour, who, in addition to various other offices, if I may use that word, such as Creator, Preserver, Lawgiver, Judge, fills also the office of Redeemer. Christ, the God-man, is pre-eminently the Saviour, the Divine Deliverer, who makes everything subordinate to the good of men. The whole strength of His Godhead is devoted to this one end. He is God giving Himself to rescue, enrich, and purify sinful and helpless souls. This is His special, exclusive, I may say, His whole, work. So long as He continues Mediator — *i.e.* until all things shall be subdued under Him—He is occupied entirely with this. There is nothing else that has a prior claim on His attention, nothing to divert or call Him aside from the efforts it involves. And you must not think of Christ as having a great many things to do, as God, which to a certain extent He must leave alone if He is to pay regard to you. When you come to Him you do not interrupt Him in the doing of something else, or call Him aside from a more momentous or congenial



occupation. He is on the outlook for you. He is waiting for the first symptom of a relenting heart. He is listening for the faintest sound of a returning step. Like him of whom the parable has told us, He has arisen and come forth, and is thinking of nothing but His lost and wandering ones. Do you suppose that the agonized and anxious father who sallies forth to find his missing child—the very joy and treasure of his heart—thinks of the comfortable home he has left behind him, of the business that awaits his presence, of the sights and sounds that greet him by the way? Is not his whole soul so absorbed and taken up in the object of his quest that all these things are no more to him than if they had never been? So Christ, who came to seek and to save that which is lost, girds Himself with the greatness of His might, and turns not aside to the right hand or the left till all His toil is accomplished. He dwells in the glory that is unspeakable, but His eye is fixed on the labour and sorrow of the world. He hears the songs of angels, but the melody of the heavens is hushed when there rises to His ears the faintest sighing of a contrite heart. Were none of the needy to come to him for help, were the stream of supplicants to slacken, till at last no one lifted up his eyes for grace, then would Christ have to mourn a bootless death, a disappointed life. The heavens would be filled with the sorrow of God, for the strength of His Anointed would languish and die. Come to Him, for He lives for you, He yearns after you. You are of His flesh and of His bones, for He is the Son of man. You belong to Him even as a man belongs to his brother, and may look to Him though all else should fail. Turn you, and behold He is with you, gently

upbraiding you because you could ever doubt that He would love you with an everlasting love. Lift up your eyes, and lo! the light of His countenance is lifted upon you. Cry to Him out of the depths, and swift as the arrows of thought He will cleave a way to your side. He will take you from the miry clay and from the bottomless pit, and set your feet upon a rock. Only speak to Him in the trouble and weariness of your heart, in your perplexity and bewilderment, and He will speak to you "large Divine and comfortable words."

"I came to Jesus as I was,  
Weary, and worn, and sad;  
I found in Him a resting-place,  
And He has made me glad."

Now, Brethren, does it not follow from this, that if a man be lost he must do a great deal to get out of Christ's way, at all events, that he can have done nothing, or next to nothing, to get into it? It seems to be an impression, by no means uncommon, that God has made salvation as difficult a thing as He possibly could, and that a man has actually to prevail against Him, and extort it, before he can possess it. I think you will find that many excuse themselves from trusting in Christ because they have a lurking belief that He does not really wish them well, or that He states the terms on which He is willing to administer help in such an exacting, unbending, and imperious way that they would rather not be obliged to Him for it. Perhaps this suspicion is strengthened by the narrowness, and somewhat repellent moroseness, which goodness too frequently wears amongst us. It has often a way of gathering its garments about it, suggestive of a consciousness of superiority, and a slight tinge of contempt for less

excellent neighbours, which provokes hostility more than admiration. But it should be remembered that this is not to be ascribed to the nature of goodness, but to the fact that in every man goodness exists side by side with many faults, and shortcomings, and sins. It is these and these alone that so grievously weaken and counteract it. Wherever true goodness is, and acts without interference, it goes forth to welcome and encourage everything that tends to become like itself, everything that contains even the possibility of such a resemblance. And Christ's goodness was of this sort, not feeble and timorous, so that it declaimed against wickedness in self-defence, not so afraid of being overcome that it put away with an indiscriminating panic evil and good together, in case the one, even when found close to the other, should prove too much for Him. He was not afraid of evil, nor had He to maintain His purity by simply refusing to have anything to do with it. He was so strong in righteousness, so absolutely unselfish in His love, so utterly destitute of inward affinity or sympathy with sin, that He could move among sinners, and eat and drink with them, in a way that completely astounded the scribes and Pharisees, without contracting a touch of defilement. He saw that even in the outcast and most abandoned there was some good thing, some possibility of purity, some early memory of a more blissful time, which, though overlaid, and beaten down, and almost crushed out, might yet be awakened and stirred into such strength of activity that it would overflow all barriers in its energy of repentance, and break forth in the freshness of a new life. So now He is not afraid of the most sinful. He will not recoil from you, not from the worst, even were you tenfold worse than you are, if you have the

slightest wish to be His. He will not refuse or let you go for any number of sins. He will come to you ; He will embrace you ; He will rejoice over you with exceeding joy. He will foster all that is noble, and gentle, and manly within you. Whosoever cometh unto Him He will in no wise cast out. And though the mountains depart and the hills be removed, His kindness shall never depart from you.

III.

*THE FAITHFUL SAYING.*

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”—  
1. TIM. i. 15.

### III.

#### THE FAITHFUL SAYING.

BY the close of the Apostolic age many of the more familiar truths of Christianity had come to be expressed in short proverbial sayings. When copies of the Scriptures were not so common as they afterwards became, and men had to trust more to their memories and less to their manuscripts, it was natural that they should put into compact and portable shape the gist of the instructions they had received on various points of doctrine or practice. And these, once ushered into circulation, gradually acquired an axiomatic authority. Several, of which my text is one, seem to have been adopted by St. Paul and incorporated into his pastoral letters. Two others occur a little farther on in this same Epistle, and in the Second Epistle to Timothy, and also in that to Titus, additional specimens of the same proverbial maxims may be found, each of them accompanied by its distinguishing formula. These all bore the express *imprimatur* of the Apostolic Church. They went forth marked with the seal of its authority. Verified by experience, tested by the strain of a time when they were put to the severest possible proof, they had passed the ordeal successfully,



and were part of the current coin of the kingdom of God.

The particular saying quoted in my text is one of which all this is specially true. Separated from its prefatory words, it declares simply that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." But this has become inseparately connected with the brief clause that follows—a mere stroke of the pen, but a stroke by which the Apostle has identified a most pregnant utterance with his own history, and given it an interest greater than it could otherwise have had. I mean, therefore, to take this supplementary statement first, and then to consider the remainder of the verse in the light which it throws upon it.

I. Why, then, did St. Paul call himself the chief of sinners? It is a startling designation, and the more you think of it the more startling you will feel it to be. It is a mere truism to say that the success of a religion depends to a large extent upon the personal veracity and goodness of its founders. None will follow a teacher, or regard him as an authentic messenger of Heaven, charged with communications from the Supreme Source of knowledge, if they know him to be untruthful or morally worse than themselves. Whenever they begin to suspect his statements his influence will decline, for his alleged Divine revelations may be mere figments of his own brain. And if he exhibit a character of mean and paltry proportions it is almost impossible that he should arouse enthusiasm or secure obedience. Every one will feel degraded by subordination to a man who has no qualities superior to his own. Now, St. Paul was practically the founder of Christianity over a large area of the heathen world. It was he who had told them almost everything they knew of Christ.

It was his version of Christ's teaching, his view of the meaning and scope of His work, with which they were most, if not exclusively familiar. And he frequently declared that he himself was the style of man a Christian ought to be. "Be ye followers of me," he said, "as I also am of Christ." How, then, were they to understand him when he asserted himself to be the chief of sinners? Is the expression to be literally construed? or is it an exaggeration which he never meant, and never expected to be taken as it stands? The peculiar solemnity of the passage precludes the idea of intentional hyperbole, and compels us to give the words their full significance. Yet if this be so were not his readers confronted by a bewildering alternative? Had their great teacher, after all, been guilty of a consummately acted fraud? Had he imposed upon them these many years, but now at the last, when death was felt to be approaching, and conscience was haunted by the shadows of the invisible, been constrained to speak the truth? It can hardly be denied that had such a confession escaped from the lips of any but a Christian Apostle it would have produced a very perplexing, if not a thoroughly suspicious impression. Would any of the great heathen philosophers, or any one who aspired to found a religion, have ventured to terminate his career by an assertion of his own incomparable sinfulness? And if he had, would it not have discredited his mission or been considered too absurd to be serious? But it was not so with St. Paul's confession. It gave no uneasiness to his most sensitive converts, no occasion for reproach to his most implacable foes. The words passed from place to place, till they became the common property of all the churches, and stood on record as almost the dying testimony of their greatest

ornament, and none felt there was anything incongruous or incomprehensible about them. Does not this prove that Christianity had a way of dealing with sin peculiar to itself, and produced a type of character absolutely unique ?

But assuming that St. Paul used the words seriously, *i.e.* without any intentional exaggeration, what did he really mean ? We are very apt to entertain defective and partial conceptions of sin. Many virtually restrict it to those modes of its expression which they themselves have experienced. They are troubled by some particular evil which natural inclination, or continued indulgence, has invested with special power. The least provocation stirs it to activity, and they find it suggested, or wakened into life, by a thousand things which have no immediate connection with it. Its hateful shadow seems to lurk behind almost every conceivable object. It leaps out upon them from apparently harmless and innocent neighbourhoods. It seems somehow to be in the air, to spring into the clearest spaces of life from some unknown and impervious retreat. Even in the most leisurely and vacant hours, when the heart is withdrawn from all contact with the outer world, and thought follows thought as the inward impulse and humour suggest, it rises up into the chambers of the brain, and fills them with the odour of its malignant presence. It may be the lust of avarice, or an envious and angry passion, or an unholy and impure desire. But whatever it may be, it is the sin which engages the attention and alarms the conscience of the man whom it attacks ; and if he be a Christian it is the sin which he struggles against, and whose very touch fills him with a self-reproach almost too heavy to be borne. It is very natural that any one in this condition should

come to conceive of sin as almost identified with his peculiar temptation. It is the sin he thinks about when any reference is made to the subject. And it is entire deliverance from its defilement that constitutes his highest idea of happiness. Was it, then, because St. Paul was pressed by some special thorn of this kind that he called himself the chief of sinners? Was he so taken up and humbled by his one infirmity, and that, perhaps, of a character that might never have troubled a less sensitive soul, that he forgot how many other sins there were, and failed to take them into account? We can hardly think so, if we remember the language and style of his Epistles. There is scarcely a sin which he does not mention and tell us something about. He points out wherein the enormity of certain transgressions consists. He shows us the disposition and temper out of which others are likely to spring, and how to resist or baffle their attacks. He draws up exhaustive catalogues of offences, for the purpose of reminding us that not one of them, however much it might be tolerated in heathen society, is consistent with citizenship in the kingdom of God. He had far too large and vivid a conception of the character of evil, far too clear and wide a view of its varied operations, to judge of himself by a faulty standard, or forget what was going on in the world around him.

But if the Apostle was not likely to exaggerate in this particular way, was it not possible he might do so in another? There are not a few who know the many shapes which evil may assume, but who know them theoretically, rather than practically. They believe they exist, but they are quite ignorant how far they prevail or to what extent they may *co-exist* in individual cases. With hearts naturally free from vicious inclinations,

they can hardly imagine that sins which have no attraction for them should be fatally seductive to others. Still less do they suspect in what strange and even inconsistent combinations such sins may frequently be found, or what a legion of them may revel in a single soul. The world they know is a world of respectability, and perhaps of high moral principle. But they do not know the outer circles of our social life, the broad zone of lawlessness that surrounds the region of decency. And you feel accordingly that the conceptions of evil which such people have are necessarily defective. They may be filled with an intense conviction of the guilt of the sins they know, but their knowledge does not go far. And their self-accusations, when they are expressed, strike you, for this reason, as being unreal. They have an air of extravagance, unperceived by those who utter them, but quite discernible by anybody else. When you hear a man of this class inveighing against his own wickedness, some one, perhaps, whose pure moral instincts shrink from the very approach of evil, and even whose failings have always leant to virtue's side, you are strongly inclined to envy him his very faults. You are conscious of sins beside which all his wrong-doing seems positive excellence. And you think that if he only knew your heart, or had a little more acquaintance with what goes on over three-quarters of the world, he would very soon change his mind about himself. Was St. Paul, then, a person of this sort? Was it ignorance of life, or of human nature, that made him place himself first in the catalogue of sinners? It can hardly have been this, either, for he lived at a time when the world was at its worst, and very few men of his day had seen so much of it as he. Not only had he travelled much, but he had mixed with all sorts and conditions of men.

He had known the chief priests and rabbis of Jerusalem, and the philosophers of the Grecian schools. He had traversed the rougher districts of heathendom, where passion gave itself vent in coarse and brutal fashion. He had beat about the slums of the largest cities, and lain in the common prisons with the scum and offscouring of the earth. You may depend upon it that the man who had written the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, and had lived in Rome two years during the reign of Nero, a reign when all kinds of devilry literally ran riot—you may depend upon it that a man of this stamp knew perfectly well what he was about when he declared himself the chief of sinners. The truth is that St. Paul had a very rare and exceptional insight into his own heart, and also into the nature of sin. The intensity of his life called into play every faculty and power he possessed. There was no part of him allowed to be at rest, no reserve of energy which lay idle, and which might have developed, had it roused itself up, an unsuspected weakness or liability to excess. The whole force of the man went into his work. He was always on the stretch, always expending every particle of strength in following after the one aim of his efforts. Hence he felt himself all through. Every weak place betrayed its weakness. Every temptation to swerve from his path pierced him like an arrow. Every sluggish or selfish impulse acted like a drag upon his eager limbs. The very ardour of his devotion, the keenness of his pursuit, made the least hindrance an unspeakable pain. Sin was a dead weight, a body of death—a dreadful, intolerable, and ever-present burden. But not only so, he saw it with an eye that penetrated farther into its depths than that of any other has done. He detected the fearful



possibilities of ruin that lie wrapped in its every germ. He knew the pervasive power that enables it to infect the whole nature of a man, if it once be suffered to escape from restraint. He knew how terrible were the passions that once strove in his own heart, and still slumbered there. He could gather from the past what they would have been doing, even as he wrote, and what they might do still but for their subjection to a higher law. And above all his bright vision of the holiness of God, his sublime conception of Christ's purity threw a white light that beat upon his sin and exposed its every line, and feature, and movement. He saw it so distinctly and plainly that other men's sins were hazy and vague, and dwelt in the region of comparative shadow. Great, violent, vast as they were in their outlet of moral corruption, his had a sharper, clearer, more definite stamp of wickedness to him. And so Paul the aged, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, still stood, at the end of his warfare, chief of sinners in his own esteem. His sin was no less now than it ever had been, rather more, so great that he could not say, even with all his knowledge of the world's evil, that any other man's was so great as his.

II. Let us consider now, secondly, why St. Paul appended this remark about himself to the statement in the verse. The drift of the passage leads us to believe that he meant it to confirm the faithfulness of the saying. It was equivalent to putting his subscription at the foot of it, as one who endorsed it or attested its truth. In proof of the assertion that Christ Jesus had come into the world to save sinners, he appealed to his own case as specially to the point. It was, indeed, he means us to understand, perfectly conclusive, for he was not only a sinner, but of sinners the chief.



There was no room for despair when he had found mercy. Thus he had led the way, shown the path was clear for any one to follow, no matter what his antecedents had been. Now, St. Paul would not have said this unless there had been good ground for it in fact. Evidently it would have added nothing to the argument if he had merely thought himself the chief of sinners, but thought so without good reason. It would not do much to recommend the skill of a physician that you declared he had healed you of a most virulent disease, if it turned out, after all, that your ailment had existed chiefly in your own imagination, and been little more than a touch of hypochondria. So St. Paul could never have recommended the saving power of Christ unless that power had approved itself by actually saving him from a pre-eminently dangerous and deadly evil. That Christ really did this the history and character of the Apostle seem to place beyond a doubt. For who is the man who is the least likely, because the most difficult, to be saved? Not the merely careless or thoughtless person, for you feel there are many chances, so to speak, that such a one will be pulled up and thoroughly sobered as life goes on. Not the profligate or openly vicious, for you know that oftentimes men fall into sins because they have more impulsiveness and energy, and not because they have less goodness at bottom, than many of their neighbours. Besides, some men's sins are forced out upon the world through the pressure of temptation; while the sins of others that are quite as bad, if not worse, are allowed to fester in the privacy of their hearts. Nor should we say that the formalist, who has only a name to live, is the most hopeless of characters. The hollowness of his profession may one day betray itself, and his utter

weakness in the hour of trial lead him to cast about for help. I should say that the most desperate man is he who is neither careless, nor a profligate, nor a formalist, but one who, earnest and correct in conduct, is conscientiously attached to a false or defective creed, and bent enthusiastically on pushing its claims. Such a one, sustained by the proud consciousness of always having done what he considered his duty, and therefore troubled by no compunctions of conscience, free from every impure or unseemly indulgence, convinced that he is right in his opinions, and so far enamoured of their excellence, or filled with contempt for their rivals, that he finds the greatest satisfaction in urging them upon the world, is not likely to be easily turned from the course he pursues. The fact is he cannot conceive any reason for a change. He is not haunted by guilty fear, or suspicious of his safety, for every want of which he is conscious is fully provided for. He is not oppressed by the emptiness of his ritual, or wearied by its unprofitable performance, for his religion is such as to command his attachment and occupy his mind. So there is no opening by which you can approach him. He is equally unassailable on every side. And you might as well try to walk up a precipice as persuade him to abandon his position. Was not St. Paul very much such a character as this? He tells us, referring to the time preceding his conversion, that he lived in all good conscience before God, and that touching the righteousness which is in the law he was blameless. He knew, as we call them, the facts of the Gospel, for these must have been keenly discussed by the pupils of Gamaliel, and he looked upon them as idle and audacious impostures. He was thoroughly satisfied both with himself and his religion, and conceived it his

peculiar mission to establish its threatened ascendancy. His was to be the honour of reviving its diminished lustre, and wiping off the foul tarnish of the heresy of Nazareth. And he threw himself into his work with an ardour and impetuosity of zeal that promised well to accomplish his task. Perhaps we may compare him to one of those pitiless inquisitors who were bent three centuries ago on crushing out the Reformation in Europe—fiery, bigoted, relentless men, consumed by the one passion of devotion to their cause, and conceiving that the most sacred claims of humanity should be treated with contempt, and that every torture was justified in procuring the suppression or recantation of heretics. “He went to the high priest breathing out threatenings and slaughters against the disciples of the Lord.” And just as it would have been hopeless to expect such a one to espouse the despised doctrines of Luther or Calvin, just as hopeless as it is to-day to look for the conversion of some ardent propagandist, so hopeless it seemed then that St. Paul should preach the faith he had so ruthlessly destroyed. Yet so it was. Christ proved able to accomplish what, humanly speaking, seemed impossible. He saved the man who of all men in the world seemed the least likely, and the most difficult, to be saved. And St. Paul never could look back to his conversion but with feelings of the most reverent awe and adoring thankfulness. It was such a marvellous deliverance, so unexpected and so undeserved. It nerved him to a life of self-sacrifice altogether unparalleled, and opened a continual fountain of praise, astonishment, and love. So wondrous was the contrast between the Apostle, the Christian, on the one hand, and the persecutor, on the other, that the Christ who had brought

it about was able, beyond all question, to save sinners of every class and degree.

III. We come now, in the third place, to the statement itself—that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Sinners were the object of His mission, and sinners without any distinction. He makes the same offer, and promises to do the same thing, for every one of us—that thing being to save us. His offer is quite free and unconditional, so that no one need have the slightest doubt as to whether it is addressed to him. The result of its acceptance is as clearly and unequivocally stated so that every one may know precisely what He undertakes to do. Now, what He has promised is not merely to rescue us from some future danger, indeed has nothing to do with the future directly at all. If it were only concerned with an evil to come it would be impossible to say with certainty whether or not it would be crowned with success. We should have to wait till the future had arrived, and the dreaded danger been actually averted. Till then the Gospel would hang in the air for want of verification. We could only hope that it might deliver us, without having any present experimental assurance that it certainly would. But this experimental proof is the very thing the Apostle furnishes from his own history. “Christ saves us from sin,” he says, “here and now, and my case substantiates the statement.” And if you should ask how this can be, since he has just told us, not simply that he was the chief of sinners before his conversion, but is so still, the answer is, that Christ does not save us by any magical or mechanical process. He does not entirely sever us from the past and its transgressions, though He does secure that they shall not involve us in the destruction which is their natural result. He leaves us

to fight a hard battle with the root of sin that still survives in our nature. Having robbed it of its power of irreparable mischief, He enlists us in completing its extinction. He spoils it of its old fascination. He exposes its emptiness and folly. He counteracts its force by revealing attractions that lift us above the sphere of its influence. And our present actual superiority to its rule is won through the gradual emancipation and strengthening of our character. We are not to be its victors just because it is withdrawn from the field and suffered to molest us no more. A victory of that sort might be called, indeed, a victory of God, but it could hardly be identified in any way with us. Christ makes *us* conquerors, by engaging our sympathies and communicating the reinforcement of His heavenly help. In short, He saves us by enabling us to beat our sin in fair fight, by making us so strong and hopeful that whereas before we were overrun at its pleasure, and carried captive at its chariot wheels, now we stand up against it, and bruise Satan under our feet. And surely this is a much more glorious way of effecting our salvation than by merely removing us from the reach of evil. Surely it is a much more crushing defeat to what has brought such misery upon us that it should be despised and baffled by its former victims. And how else could we be delivered from an unreasonable and slavish fear of it than by letting us see that we ourselves can actually master and hold it down? In other words, we are saved by faith. Our nature, instead of being destroyed in order to make way for another, is redeemed, to be succoured and developed into fulness and power. And this can only be done by our receiving continually new enlightenment and grace from Christ, and driving back

sin, inch by inch, out of all the strongholds of our hearts.

St. Paul, then, could say that he was the chief of sinners, and yet appeal to himself as an illustration of Christ's power to save. Indeed, his very confession was itself an evidence of his redemption. It revealed a humility that implied the overthrow of pride and self-complacency, the very qualities in which the strength of sin resides. And while the memory, and, in a sense, the responsibility, of his past rebellion against Christ remained with him, and evil in one form or another was still present to assail him, yet sin was a thing renounced, and his attitude towards it entirely changed. And this is, after all, the practical point. If your whole relations to sin are completely reversed, if you see it is a thing from which the old charm has departed, and which fills you with repugnance instead of desire, if you are battling against it manfully, instead of yielding to its insidious approaches, if you have pronounced against it all as equally to be condemned, and have severed it from the inward region of the affections and the will, then, however much it may harass you, or the memory of it fill you with reproaches, it has ceased to be a thing which will destroy you. You are saved from its final triumph. Only see that you keep hold of the promise of mercy and of grace to help us in Jesus Christ. Let no onset of sin drive you from Him, no fresh development of its resources tempt you to distrust Him. You can only fight and overcome as you fall back on His word, and grasp the hope which it reveals. And always be sure that this word will prove true. It is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that He came to save sinners. It will stand the severest test. You may expose it to any shock of evil, and it

will not be overthrown; you may lay upon it any burden or weight of adverse conditions, and it will not give way. Try it in any circumstances, and to any extent, and it will issue triumphant out of the ordeal. Worthy of all acceptation, it will not fail to fulfil the hopes of any one who receives it. He that believeth in Him shall not be confounded.





IV.

*THE CHRISTIAN METAMORPHOSIS.*

"To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."—PHIL. i. 21.

#### IV.

##### *THE CHRISTIAN METAMORPHOSIS.*

THESE words explain the confidence entertained by St. Paul, that whether he should live or die, the result would in either case redound to the glory of Christ. On the one hand, should he live, his life would continue to be a development of his devotion to his Lord, and of the various gifts with which He had enriched him for His service. On the other hand, should he die, his conviction that the change would be entirely for the better would ensure his meeting it when it came with that joyful courage which would equally magnify the name of his Master. But the words in themselves, apart from their context, are most striking. They present life and death to us in a way which reveals the vast contrast which Christianity had introduced into the world. The great personalities of heathenism had passed like dazzling meteors across the sky, but were only remembered for the brilliant things they had done, or the daring speculations in which they had engaged. The systems they had taught, their conceptions of duty or happiness, were handed down to succeeding generations, and became their guides or watchwords for a time. But with very few exceptions, the men themselves had not been the embodiments of any nobler

interpretation of truth or of goodness. They were altogether secondary to what they had said or what they had done. In the New Testament it is precisely the other way. No teacher could be compared with Christ; but it is not Christ's doctrine that fills the minds of His followers with enthusiasm, but Christ Himself. It is from Him, and not from His words, they draw their hope and inspiration; and their life is not determined simply by a scrupulous respect to His precepts, but it is filled, possessed, and monopolized by His personal presence. Accordingly, they never speak of Him as One who is dead, and their language would be unintelligible on such a supposition. It assumes and presupposes the Resurrection throughout. Christ is different from all other persons who have ever appeared; the relation of His disciples to Him is different from that of disciples to any other master, and the amount of the difference is to be explained by the fact that He is alive for evermore.

But if Christ presents a remarkable contrast to all preceding teachers in the central and commanding position which His Person occupies, how much more marvellous the contrast becomes when we consider His influence, not only upon the present, but upon the future of His followers! Who had ever been supposed to exercise a sway over men which should perpetuate itself beyond the grave? What teacher had ever been invested by his most devoted admirers with a power to protect and glorify them in the world to come? Such a thing was inconceivable. It would have involved an extension of human claims into a realm reserved exclusively for Divine control. It would have confused the boundaries between the two. It was, indeed, a conception as impossible as the Incarnation, as far above

the reach of the world as the thought of eternal life. But time vanishes in presence of Christ. The range of His power knows no limitation. Attachment to His Person is unimpaired by the most searching of all experiences. | The fact that He is alive for evermore guarantees the permanence of all that is essential in our relation to Him. It secures that death, which had hitherto been looked upon as an absolute loss, shall only confirm and glorify that relationship, relieving it of all that is alien to its development, and providing it with the noblest sphere for its expression. In short, fellowship with Christ abolishes death. It lifts the soul into a region where its power to hurt is gone. The death which is loss is the issue of the life that is natural, but when that life is changed into Christ its issue undergoes a corresponding change, and the death into which it passes is no longer loss, but gain. When to live is Christ, to die is, so to speak, more Christ. ✓

It would be difficult to find all this more significantly expressed than in the words of my text. It describes the Christian metamorphosis, that complete subjection to Christ, involved in discipleship, which displaces, as it were, the original Ego, and puts Him in its place, ranging under Him all the activities which it formerly ruled. "To me to live is Christ," says the Apostle. All that was distinctively his own had disappeared, in so far as that was inconsistent with the life which Christ lived. Everything had been brought into such thorough unison with Him that no province or tract of his life could be found where His supremacy was not owned, and where tribute was not paid to Him. No enterprises were undertaken which took him beyond the lines of His fellowship, so that he had to return in order to resume it. His life acknowledged no such division. In all its

ramifications and currents of action it set in one direction, and that direction was Christ. Watch it at any point, not only where its rapid and triumphant rush can leave you in no doubt of the way it goes, but in its quiet still reaches, where it winds in links through pasture-lands, and smoothes out its broad surface for rest; and though it may seem to be doing nothing but flashing back the bright sun or idly gazing into the heavens, it is owning the spell of the master-attraction, and making through all its depths for the one great goal. So completely, indeed, was his whole life taken up and concerned with his Lord, so entirely was it dictated and determined by Him, that it really was Christ's life. He was responsible for it, and the best and truest way in which he could describe it was simply by saying it was Christ.

To bring out the nature of this life a little more clearly, there are one or two things to be noticed regarding it.

I. First of all, St. Paul was indebted to Christ for it. If he traced it back he found it went no farther than his journey to Damascus. Wherever he went behind that, even by a step, Christ was not to be found. He entered a region so different in every way that he could not help at once becoming aware of the fact. That point, therefore, divided his history into two distinct and utterly dissimilar sections. On the far side of it, and up to it, Christ had only roused him into fierce and vindictive opposition. On this side of it, and from that time to this, he had fallen completely under His sway, and opposition had changed into the most enthusiastic and absolute devotion.

Now, the question is, How are you to account for so sudden and total a change? For as to its suddenness

no one can doubt. A journey begun for one fixed and determinate purpose is all but finished. A few steps more, and the Apostle enters the gates of the beautiful city which marks its end, there to work it out ruthlessly and to the full. But in the twinkling of an eye he is arrested in his course, his purpose is shattered and falls to pieces. He passes the gates, but his old mission is left behind, and his life is in utter collapse. Hardly ever before had a brief hour left a man so different from what it found him.

Then few, I suppose, will dispute the completeness of the change, that is to say, that it affected not part of his life only, but the whole of it, and not merely altered its direction slightly, but entirely reversed it. How, then, are you to account for such a phenomenon? In the history of all men who are not able to define their lives as St. Paul did his, in other words, in the history of all men who are not Christians, there is a moral identity which remains unchanged throughout. There is no point in them where the connection is so completely broken that you can call the first part of it old, and the second part new. Character evolves itself according to certain general and well-known laws ; and though these may be modified or even neutralized in their action by the play of surrounding forces, they never can by any natural means be entirely reversed. That would be equivalent to saying that they were displaced by other laws of an opposite kind, a thing which on the face of it could only be done by Him who has made our human nature, and imposed upon it the conditions of its development. To take an illustration. There has been no man in modern times whose life has started from a point so far below the elevation which it afterwards reached as that of Napoleon Bonaparte,

yet any one who has studied his career knows that each step was prepared and explained by the one that went before. Take him at the very zenith of his power, and look back along the line by which he advanced, and you will see that on the whole it was a straight line. Judging at least from the direction it pursued at the outset, it was natural enough it should lead to the point where he afterwards stood. In the obscure artillery officer who handled his guns so well as to batter the English out of Toulon, in the young general of Brigade who blew the remnants of the French Revolution into empty space with his "whiff of grape-shot," we can detect the qualities that made the Emperor—the wonderful strategic genius, the strength of will, the intuition that seized the exact moment when to strike, and above all the selfish, unscrupulous ambition that sacrificed everything, without remorse, to the attainment of his end. Now, all this is exactly what you cannot see in the case of St. Paul. There was nothing in his previous career of which you could say his apostolic life was the natural outcome. You cannot put your finger on anything in the first section of his history which can be held as prophetic of what the second was to be. Quite the reverse. Judging from the whole course his activity had taken up to his approach to Damascus, we should say it must have run on in a torrent of bitter, reckless opposition to Jesus of Nazareth and all His followers. None could possibly have foretold that his very next step after entering the city would be to preach the same Jesus whom he had come to persecute. As well might one have expected that the river rushing on to its headlong plunge over the fall should rise wildly into mid air at the very moment of its leap, and roll back the whole



volume of its waters towards their fountain head. We are driven, then, to conclude that St. Paul was indebted for the life he lived, not to any happy combination of circumstances, nor to the sudden awaking into energy of any dormant element in his nature, but to Christ Himself, with whom for the first time it had come into direct and open contact, and from whom it took its new and triumphant departure. He it was who had met him, as it were, in full tilt, and struck him down, who had shown him his error, quickened him with His Spirit, and sent him forth to live and die under the spell of His ascendancy. And ~~you~~<sup>one</sup> must not imagine that when the Apostle says, "To me to live is Christ," he uses Christ simply as an equivalent to what we call Christianity, or the Christian Church. A man may be indebted to the Church for his creed or his opinions; he may have received from it all the notions he has about God and the world to come; but he cannot possibly receive life from it. Nothing can communicate life but a living person—neither sacraments, nor worship, nor any orthodoxy, however pure. Extract from these all they are able to yield, and you will not get life. That flows only from one Source, is contained for us only in one Person, and that Person is Christ. From Him St. Paul's life came, and into Him it pushed its springs and was abundantly fed.

Are you, then, indebted for your life to Christ? You profess to stand in a certain relation to Him. You doubtless hope that in some way, which you may never have very clearly defined, you will be the better for His having come, and died, and risen again. But are you the better for these things now? When you run your eye back through the years you have lived, has each of these grown quite

naturally out of the other, so that the second has just been what the first has made it, and so on up to the twentieth or fortieth, as the case may be? Has each step you have taken been, on the whole, in the line of the one you had taken before, so that your life has obeyed its original impulse, and rolled itself out exactly in the direction which might have been expected from its start? When you look at yourself at this moment, at your character, at your conduct, at the real reasons why you work, and act, and live as you do, are you conscious that these are just very much what they always were? If so, for what are you indebted to Christ? What has been the use of His death upon the cross so far as you are concerned? What difference has it made to you that there is such a Being as He is at all? No doubt you are largely indebted to a great deal that stands in a relation of greater or less dependence upon Him. You owe much to the Scriptures, and to the habits of life and of thinking which they have been the means of creating. You have been so placed that you could not possibly remain wholly unaffected by the influence which they have set to work. It was a natural result of the time and place in which your lot was cast. But is your life such—such in its likes and dislikes, such in its aim and direction—that you can say, “All this would have been otherwise had Christ not interfered? Had I been left to follow the bias that once was strongest within me; had the desires and ambitions that swayed me most been allowed to grow and develop themselves after their own fashion, I should never have been either what or where I am. I can only account for my life being such as it is on the supposition

that it has come from Christ, that somehow or other He has furnished it with a new starting-point." I think if we were more careful of tracking our religion to its source there would be much less self-deception than there is, and much less of merely nominal attachment to the Church of God. I wish I could persuade you all, as reasonable and earnest men, to trace it to its fountain head, to ask yourselves whence it comes, and of what it is the product. If you know it can be easily explained without having recourse to Christ at all, then you may be sure it is none of His. If you feel it has done nothing for you, and made nothing out of you at all corresponding to its lofty claims, then surely it cannot have come from Him who gives to as many as receive Him the right to become the sons of God. For every Christian has been indebted to Him. He has been born not only of flesh and blood, but born again by the will of God, and the life which he lives he lives by the faith of the Son of God. In receiving Him, and out of Him, it took its rise, and from Him it is continually and steadily supplied.

II. More than this. When St. Paul said, "To me to live is Christ," he meant that Christ was not only the beginning and perennial source of his life, but also its terminus and goal. Just imagine where the Apostle's life would have gone had it followed its original bent. What a crusade of persecution it would have become! With what swift and relentless fury he would have destroyed, one after another, the congregations of the hateful sect! How he would have perplexed and paralyzed the work of the Twelve! Who would have been found able to withstand his keen dialectic, the matchless force and fire of his

argument? If Judaism proved so formidable a foe to the Christian Church with Paul of Tarsus found in the van of its opponents, what would it have been with him upon its side? What would have followed St. Peter's cowardice at Antioch? Would the Church have issued from the doors of the synagogue, and planted the cross on the limits of the world? Would not the name of the Apostle of the Gentiles have been found first on the roll of those who have devastated and devoured the Church of God? To him to live would not have been Christ, but anti-Christ. But now that his life had taken its rise in Christ it made for Him as its end. Left to work itself out to its natural issue, it would develop and expand exactly into such a life as Christ lived. He himself would become even as Christ was, pure as He was pure, perfect as He was perfect, his whole nature answering to His, enlarging till it filled out precisely into His stature and mould, line answering to line, and feature to feature. In short, Christ in His perfect manhood was that into which he would grow. And so it is with every Christian's life. Christ is what it naturally tends to become. It may be very far from Him as yet, but having started from Him, it is advancing towards Him. It may be a very feeble and fitful thing, scarcely conscious of its own existence, but in virtue of its very being it turns to Him. It may be struggling on with great difficulty and effort, continually staggered and brought to a standstill by shocks of temptation, as the life of a child can sometimes hardly hold its own against the assaults of disease, but still it does hold on. These things which make its growth so difficult, and which so painfully retard its progress, are not in the life

itself, but something external to it. Clear them away, and it will grow smoothly, silently, steadily, as the seed which sprang up secretly, men knew not how—first the blade, then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear. So we may know whether our life has sprung from Christ by seeing whether or not it is making towards Him. Suppose for a moment it had its own way. Let all external pressure be removed. Let there be nothing from without, in the shape of public opinion, the force of circumstances, the influence of education, or the fear of future punishment, constraining it to act in the very least degree contrary to its own inclination; let it be free to follow its peculiar bent, and gratify its instincts; what would it come to? Would it by any possibility end in Christ? You know what is your ruling and strongest passion—what you would like best to be or to possess. Is it Christ, or likeness to Him? Is your chief ambition to make money? Is that likely to grow into Christ? Did He live to make money? Is it to win repute among men, or a good position in society? Will that either grow into Christ? Did He live to aggrandize Himself, or to push His way in front of His neighbours? Is it to gratify some cherished lust or sinful desire? What this is likely to grow to I need not say. Is there anything in you at all; which, even were it surrounded by the most favourable conditions, and coaxed and wooed by all the appliances of God's spiritual husbandry, would eventually end in Christ? Perhaps you say you are not sure. You do not seem to have any one desire which is more powerful than another. Each apparently exists in very nearly the same strength, and all act with about the same intensity or the same

feebleness. So well, indeed, do they balance and counteract each other that you feel as if you really had no desires at all. You live just because you must live. You work because you cannot get on without working. You discharge certain duties because they have inevitably sprung up out of the relations which you fill, and you cannot help discharging them. But on the whole your life has no aim or purpose. You get through it, but you have not grasped it all in a firm resolve, and said, "I will use and handle this, and turn it to account for God." Do you expect, then, that such a life will ever grow into Christ? Is it such an easy or natural thing for human lives to do this? Are men's hearts so constituted that however long they may seem to hesitate, they will ultimately, if you only give them time, gravitate to Christ? Surely all experience answers, No. If you have no ambition which rules all the rest, nothing which you live for and work for, then you may be sure that Christ is not in you. For, wheresoever He comes, He is not merely one of a crowd of competitors; He reigns supreme. Whenever He enters into a man's life, and gives it a new start, He becomes at once the chief object of desire. A Christian may be very ignorant, and in many respects a very unamiable character; he may fall into many sins, and do a great many censurable, inconsistent and stupid things; but in spite of all this, if you ask him what he wishes most to be, he will answer at once, To be like Christ. And if you ask him what gives him the greatest pain, and fills him with the deepest regret, he will answer with equal readiness that he represents Him so unworthily, and reflects so little of His beauty and grace.

Such, then, was St. Paul's life, and such the life of a



Christian should be. Christ is the beginning, the middle, and the end of it. Break it at any point, and there you will find Him. Invade any of its provinces, and these you will discover are tributary to Him. There is no part of it where He is not to be found, and which does not in some way minister to His service. If your efforts for Christ are easily distinguishable from your ordinary and usual style of living, so that they have no inward affinity, and nothing in common with each other, they may occupy a certain amount of time, and fill up its corners and odd spaces, but they are not your life. Unless to be and act Christ is the rule and not the exception, you cannot say that to you *to live* is Christ; you are not one with the Apostle or with all saints in that which is deepest and most central in your character.

I pass on now to say a few words on the second half of my text: "To die is gain." If to us to live is Christ there need be no fear that death will deprive us of anything which we really prize. For it is not Christ that dies, nor the life we have received from Him, but only that in which it resides, its temporary tabernacle and home. From this death will release us, and with it from all those evils into connection with which it constantly brings us, from all that here hampers and enfeebles, from all temptation, and from all sin. And our life, transferred into a region where everything is congenial to its exercise and growth, clothed in due season with a new and perfect body, which will give the amplest expression to all its powers, a body like unto Christ's glorious body, will develop freely and without restraint. In short, death will lead to the perfection of our identity with Him, bringing about the end of that which is here begun. Hope will change into fruition. Desire shall be satisfied. The painful,

humbling disproportion between the will to do and the power to accomplish will pass away, for the stature of the perfect man shall then have been reached. All the faculties and powers we possess will be turned into harmony, and that harmony will be Christ.

But remember that all this is only on the supposition that to us now to live is Christ. If your life does not begin to make for Him here, it will not do so beyond the "bourn" from which "no traveller returns." It will only depart from Him at a greater velocity, having escaped from all that restrained it before. To you death will be total and utter loss. There is not one thing which you prize, not one thing which yields you pleasure or delight, which you will not leave for ever behind you. How can it be otherwise? For what reason has God stored the world with the means of enjoyment, and with endless resources on which our skill and ingenuity may work? Is it not that all these things might be used by us for the fulfilment of His purposes? He could not mean that they should be turned into so many weapons of war against Him. And if you have abused them in such a way, if you have lavished them on your own sinful pleasure or aggrandisement, if you have forged them into arms with which you assault that which is righteous, honourable, and pure, and even defy Himself, what right have you to suppose that He will furnish you with such means of working mischief for ever? Such a thing is not credible. To all to whom to live is not Christ death will be nothing else than loss—loss without compensation, a severance from everything in which joy or strength has been found, a being unclothed of all that has kept life comfortable, and deadened the pain of conscience, and the hunger



of immortality. Everything that has been counted precious will have to be surrendered, and all that has been feared, shrunk from, trembled at will have to be encountered and faced. There is no disarmament of the terrors and infinite loss of death, save in the life which is Christ, the life which is begun, continued, and ended in Him.



V.

*THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.*

“Therein [in the Gospel of Christ] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith : as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”—ROM. i. 17.

## V.

### *THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.*

THE two statements of the previous verse—that the Gospel is the power of God to salvation, and that it proves itself to be so to every one who believes—are further explained and confirmed by these words. The Gospel is the saving power of God, because it reveals a Divine righteousness which, in fact, is itself salvation. It is to every one that believes, for this righteousness is from faith to faith. The first of these propositions declares to us what gives the Gospel its peculiar and saving property. It has many excellences which may well recommend it to men, and which we know, as a matter of fact, have done so. It inculcates a morality which in purity and completeness is unapproached. It presents us with its historical embodiment, in a character equally lofty and unique. It contains the noblest and most attractive conception of God which has ever dawned upon the world, while it invests men with a new and unspeakable dignity by bringing life and immortality to light. In all these respects it has shown itself possessed of a powerful and progressive influence, and has strongly affected the whole movement of modern history. Where it has not made actual converts it has inspired admiration and respect.

Where this is avowedly withheld it is partially conceded by that imitation which we are told is the sincerest form of flattery. And even when it provokes unmistakable hostility, this is often so utterly unreasonable that it only covers itself with absurdity, and effects its own undoing. In short, wherever Christianity has come it has laid men under varying degrees of obligation, however grudgingly the debt may be acknowledged. More deeply, often, than we imagine it has coloured our thoughts and controlled our conduct, so that there is not one of us who would not in some respects be different but for its presence. Yet while all this is true, it remains that what constitutes the Gospel a saving power is that revelation of righteousness of which the Apostle here speaks. Whatever else it may do for you, in awakening conscience, in haunting you with an ideal which you have never really embraced, in sobering you with convictions of judgment and eternity, it will not save you unless this righteousness be apprehended. And what in the last resort will it have done for you if it has failed to save you? To have retarded the process of moral deterioration, to have stimulated to fitful efforts after goodness and truth, is, after all, but little when the efforts have come to nought, and ultimate death and destruction have ensued. If, then, you wish the Gospel to accomplish its purpose in you, if you listen to its message, and profess to receive it in the hope that it may save you, here you are told where its saving virtue lies. It is the power of God unto salvation because therein is the righteousness of God revealed.

I. What, then, is the righteousness of God? The phrase is capable of misconstruction, and, in fact, often has been misunderstood. The ostensible meaning might

seem to be the righteousness which is a characteristic or attribute of God. But it cannot be said that this in any special sense is a revelation of the Gospel. It may more truly be described as the great theme of Old Testament teaching, the prophets never wearying of vindicating its claims, and of showing how certainly it will finally prevail. Moreover, it is impossible to see how the revelation of righteousness in such a sense could constitute the *saving* power of the Gospel. We can understand how it might awaken conscience and deepen the conviction of sin—that is, it might set in a clearer light our need of redemption, and the hopelessness of our attaining it for ourselves. But this would only make our condemnation more obvious and inevitable. It would not in any way minister to our relief. The righteousness of God, as is evident from the passage which St. Paul quotes from Habakkuk, as well as from other parallel expressions, is the righteousness of which God is the Author, which He provides and bestows, so that the man who acquires it becomes thereby a just or righteous man. “It denotes what makes us clear in the eye of the law, satisfactory to justice.” Now, this is precisely what we need, and it supplies the essential condition of all fellowship with God, and therefore of holiness or victory over sin. The testimony of the Apostle is that the whole world is guilty before God, and this testimony is endorsed by every one who knows himself. There is none, he says, who does nothing but good—good that is not impaired or detracted from by a single evil act. On the contrary, every one has sinned more or less, and by far the majority of men so heinously that their sin is far more conspicuous than their goodness. None, accordingly, is clear in the eye of the law. Against every one there

lies an accusation, and from every one justice demands satisfaction. And when I say justice I mean, of course, God. For in Him justice exists in its absolute perfection, nor can He be satisfied with us, or count us as anything else than transgressors, until we stand guiltless in His sight. The great question is, How can this be accomplished? And the only answer, independently of the Gospel, is, By our own efforts or not at all. It is no part of the righteous judge, as such, to assail the transgressor. It might be a palpable breach of his duty to do so. His province is to impose the penalty which the law demands, and to see that it is paid. Hence man has never looked to God alone to clear him, but always to some sacrifice or endeavour of his own, which might cancel or atone for his offence. But no sacrifice could ever assure him that his relation to God had been rendered satisfactory, and that simply because he has never received any Divine promise to that effect. God has never declared that any sacrifice we could offer would infallibly secure such a result. However precious it might be, even though a man had exhausted his whole resources in providing it, it might still, for all he knew, be utterly futile, and he could never be certain that the ground of dissatisfaction had been thoroughly removed. The same is true of every effort after repentance or amendment of life. God has never declared that any such effort, however sincere, would atone for a guilty past. At the best, therefore, one could only hope that such expedients might attain their object. And this hope has been the root and spring of almost all religions. Men have submitted to endless sacrifices, and to the most painful and degrading penance, that the future might contain some prospect of deliverance from evil. But the Gospel



shows that the desired prospect is not to be secured by any such means. It absolutely shuts the door of hope in the direction in which the world had looked for it. It proclaims the absolute worthlessness of every substitute which a sinful humanity can find, simply because none can equal in value the sinner himself, whose person the violated law most justly claims. Even in the Old Testament it was never taught that the blood of bulls and of goats could by any intrinsic efficacy take away sin. That it did so was due to a gracious appointment of God, by which He was pleased to accept it as an effectual offering, and to invest it with a virtue which really only belongs to the offering of Christ. To this the sacrifices of Judaism pointed forward, and with its results they were partially credited, as one will release a debtor on a good promissory note, even although the date of actual payment may not have arrived. In themselves, however, they could not pacify the conscience, because there is plainly no proportion between them and those for whom they were offered.

The Gospel is equally clear in excluding all attempts made by men themselves to atone for the past by future amendment. At the best the future can only suffice for itself. It cannot supply the defects of the past from its superfluous fulness. And our future never attains even this conceivable best. It can never meet its own demands, far less become responsible for previous debts. What made the past faulty, an incapacity to fulfil our obligations, still continues with us. It adds to the ever-increasing burden of our arrears. It perpetuates the insolvency that has beggared the bygone years, and carries it into the years to come. So that it is not on arbitrary grounds Scripture condemns what

it calls at times our own righteousness, because it is provided by ourselves ; or the righteousness of the law, because it is evoked by the desire to meet its requirements. Its condemnation rests upon the hopeless enfeeblement and ruin which sin has wrought upon our nature ; hopeless, I say, because humanity can provide no sacrifice for its own transgression, no remedy for its own weakness. But what the world could not do for itself, and what each succeeding age proved it to be more and more incapable of doing, God did for it. And if the Gospel passes its sentence of impotence upon us, it is only to direct us more earnestly to its wondrous provision of saving grace. It shuts the door of hope in one direction, where it seemed to be partially open ; and it opens it wide in another, where it had seemed to be absolutely closed. And the open door which is thus revealed is this righteousness of God, a position or relation in which the man who enters upon it stands clear in the eye of the law, as clear as though he had never broken it in a single jot or tittle. This position has been secured by the mediation of Christ, whom God gave to be the Saviour of the world. He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sin. In our nature He fulfilled all righteousness. Every demand of the law was satisfied in His life of pure and unsullied obedience, and whatever Divine holiness required was realized and presented there. The Prince of this world—the accuser of the brethren, who watches for every loophole of attack, and presses the claims of justice against the slightest violation of righteousness—found nothing in Him. And He gave Himself for us, to bear, as our Representative and Substitute, the penalty of our disobedience, so that everything the law might claim at our hands might be infallibly and fully met. Against

Him it has nothing to urge. By His resurrection from the dead the Divine satisfaction was openly declared, and He passed through the heavens to enter into the presence of God on our behalf. There He appears, the eternal and unchangeable pledge of a righteousness fulfilled, presenting to His Father a humanity clear of every ground of accusation, and securing to every one who will trust in Him a safe standing in His sight. He is the Lord our righteousness. He is made of God unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.

This, then, is what the Apostle means when he says that in the Gospel is revealed a righteousness of God. He means that God, in His infinite mercy, has brought it about, that through Christ we may enter into a relation towards Him as blameless and free from guilt as though we had never broken, but always perfectly kept, His holy law. Thus understood, it is not difficult to see how the Gospel becomes thereby the power of God to salvation. For thus, first of all, it lays the foundation of fellowship with God. So long as sin is unforgiven, and we remain unaccepted in His sight, fellowship with Him is impossible. Sin forbids His dealing with us on a friendly footing. It compels Him to treat us as offenders on whom the guilt of our transgression lies. His love is arrested in its flow, and cannot expend itself freely upon us, because justice interposes, and demands that we be dealt with otherwise. I do not say that God does not love us at all previous to our justification or forgiveness, for that is contrary to the teaching of Scripture in many express and beautiful passages. "God," we are told, "so loved the *world*, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting

life." His love, that is, was the cause, and not the result, of the sacrifice of Christ. It existed before it, and was the moving spring of that long history of redemption that reached its climax on Calvary. It exists still, without having suffered eclipse or contracted the range and area of its operation. But it cannot do for us what it would until we stand justified and clear in His sight. Instead of its full volume, which can only reach us through Christ, we receive but the comparatively feeble streams which subsidiary channels are able to convey. It comes to us in the guise of long-suffering and forbearance. It exhausts its resources in the effort to convict us of sin, and persuade us to assume the position in which He can freely bless. But until we yield ourselves to Him He cannot manifest the fulness of His compassion. He cannot draw us to Himself, and enrich us as His forgiven and accepted children with the wealth of His Fatherly affection, and the wonderful transforming power of that peculiar love which is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us. Therefore it is that the broad foundation and starting-point of all religion lies in being right with God. Until this is accomplished nothing can be right. There is a sense of estrangement that disturbs and unhinges your whole life. Your feelings towards Him cannot be as they ought. Your worship will be constrained and heartless, your service fitful and reluctant. If passing gleams of hope visit you, and you push on spasmodically from day to day, you can have no true or lasting peace, and to living communion with God you will be an absolute stranger. For the thought of Him will be unwelcome, and the uneasy restlessness it creates will betray how far you still are from being at home in His presence.

Further, if being right with God is essential to fellowship with Him, so also it is fellowship with Him that secures the growth of spiritual life. As the branch must abide in the vine to receive the sap and nourishment that circulates through the tree, we must abide in connection with God to be partakers of His Spirit and power. This it is that enables us to bring forth the fruits of holiness. For holiness is not a negation simply, to be conceived as consisting in abstinence from evil deeds. Its essence is love—the love to God which awakens within us as we apprehend the blessedness of forgiveness, and realize how absolutely we owe it to His grace ; and the love to our fellows which longs to bring them also into the enjoyment of the same gracious favour in which we stand. Thus it is the fulfilling of the law, for it not only restrains us from violating the claims of God or of our neighbour, but constrains us to render to each that which is due. In proportion as it prevails the subtle forces of sin will wither and die. The expulsive power of the new affection will purge the soul of its fleshly desires. As the soiled and crumpled leaves are pushed off the tree by the rising sap that swells the buds with the foliage of the coming summer, so it will cleanse us from dead works to serve the living God.

Thus the revelation of God's righteousness makes the Gospel the effectual instrument of His saving power, because it brings us into that fellowship with Himself which gives us the victory over sin by strengthening us to do His will.

Are you, then, brethren, right with God ? or have you been long trying to right yourselves, and hope that some day you may yet succeed ? Is this the goal and end of your religion, the result to which you trust it

may ultimately bring you, the prize which you conceive is to reward all your weary and oftentimes unwilling labour? Then you are putting that last which ought to be first. What you are so painfully toiling for, you will never acquire as the fruit of your own endeavours. God has already provided, and freely offers it. He points you to Christ, and says, "Behold the Lamb, which taketh away the sin of the world." What you have failed to do and never can do He has accomplished. And when you cease to work out a righteousness of your own, and rest upon what Christ has done, then the peace which has eluded your grasp will come into your heart. And you will fear no evil, for your hope will rest on that sure foundation, elect, tried, precious, which God Himself has laid, and of which He has said, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in Him, for he shall never be confounded."

II. The remainder of my text confirms the second statement of the previous verse, that the Gospel is the saving power of God to every one that believes. It is so because it is from faith to faith, a difficult expression if you take it word by word, but sufficiently plain in its general sense, which is that on our side everything but faith is excluded. This righteousness of which the Apostle has spoken is not due to our own works, which do not contribute to it anything whatever. It is without or apart from these, as he elsewhere puts it, and as distinct and separate from them as Christ Himself is distinct and separate from us. When it becomes ours it is due entirely to faith—faith which appropriates Christ, and by resting upon Him enters into it and invests us with all its prerogatives. "We are found in Him, not having our own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ."



And just as it is due to faith, so also it is designed to produce faith. The more thoroughly its character is understood, the more perfectly its completeness and satisfactoriness in all points is perceived, the more will faith in it, or rather faith in Christ, be confirmed. For if anything weakens faith, unnerves and unsettles its strength, it is just our not being sure of our rightness with God, or of the foundation on which that rightness depends. Doubtfulness here opens the door to all sorts of evils that disturb our peace, throw our spiritual life into confusion, and even threaten to tear it up by the roots. We get confused and bewildered, are uncertain about God's promises, misinterpret His dealings, and are brought to a standstill, if we are not utterly cast down. On the other hand, if the ground of our acceptance be clearly distinguished and seen in its length and breadth in Christ Jesus, we learn more boldly to appropriate the contents of His salvation. The blessings of sonship and of access to God, the freedom of service, and the strength that fits for it, the hope that makes not ashamed, and the life everlasting are seen to be ours. They dawn upon us with increasing clearness. They open out to our delighted gaze in all their unspeakable wealth. They inspire and clothe us with a subtle joy and gladness that thrills and quickens us with the powers of the world to come. And if you wish to surmount the trepidations and hesitancy of a feeble and unstable faith, consider well this righteousness which the Gospel reveals, and into which God calls you through His Son. Here lies the secret of its power to transform you and lift you up. If you ask what it is that so often fills you with discomfort, and infects you with a vague and apparently causeless discontent, you will find it is a lurking



suspicion that something is wrong between you and your God. Ponder well, then, what He has done to put you right. Look unto Him on whom He hath laid the iniquities of us all, and of whom it is said that "by the Obedience of one shall many be made righteous;" and rest upon that obedience as being all-sufficient for you. There is no other sure foothold for us. But this is sure. It is the rock of our salvation, on which we may stand secure amid the buffetings of an accusing conscience and all the assaults of evil.

In conclusion, Brethren, consider how the revelation of this righteousness, and its being offered to faith, opens an immediate entrance into a state of salvation. The radical error into which we all run in reference to our acceptance with God is that we must do something in order to secure it. We must do our best to satisfy Him, and for the rest trust He will take the will for the deed. Or we must develop so much faith as to accomplish the act of believing. Or we must work ourselves into an appropriate state of mind about our sin, so that our feelings of penitence and sorrow may be all that they ought to be. If this were so, then no doubt our salvation would require to stand over until we had satisfied these conditions, and our first duty would be to endeavour to fulfil them. But in this case we should be obliged to contribute something towards making out our righteousness. Instead of being wholly provided by God, it would be partly at least provided by ourselves. The sacrifice of Christ would not be the sole ground of our forgiveness, but be supplemented by something accomplished by us. Now, all this is exactly what is precluded by the fact that our righteousness is of God, provided entirely by Him, and depending on nothing but on what Christ has accomplished. And

to suppose that faith is a grace or virtue which is somehow to be combined or mixed up with His work, so that our acceptance is to depend upon the two together, is entirely to mistake the nature of faith. Faith is simply that which receives and rests upon the finished redemption, the perfect satisfaction of Jesus Christ. So far from being an act or something to be done, it consists essentially in giving up the attempt to do anything whatever towards righting ourselves with God, and resting satisfied with what Christ has done. And if you ask, Am I quite safe in being satisfied with the work of Christ? the answer is, You are quite safe in being satisfied with what has satisfied God. It is the foundation which He Himself has laid. It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth? Rest here, and you shall rest indeed. Just as you are you are welcome, without a moment's waiting or delay. The open door is set before you; "the righteousness of God is revealed."



VI.

*THE TENURE OF TRUTH.*

“Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance : but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”—*ST. MATT.* xxv. 29.

## VI.

### *THE TENURE OF TRUTH.*

THE principle expressed by our Lord in this somewhat paradoxical form occurs in various connections in the first three Evangelists. It is one that receives illustrations from so many different quarters that it could hardly fail to be frequently suggested during a ministry that dealt with almost every side of character and every aspect of life. We find it accordingly solemnly asserted, at the commencement of His speaking in parables, as a weighty reason why men should take heed how they listened to His words. It is recorded by St. Luke as the moral to be drawn from the parable of the pounds ; and here, again, it finds a fitting place at the close of the grand cycle of His teaching, as laying down the rule which governs our relations to it as a whole.

Though in the lips of our Lord the primary reference of the words was of course to the kingdom of heaven, the truth which they embody is in reality of universal application. It obtains in every department of human activity, and verifies itself so constantly before our eyes that we regard it as a self-evident axiom. The man who *has*, in the deepest sense of the term, has proved that he possesses a faculty of acquisition which may exert

itself indefinitely in adding to his store. Not only so ; the thing he has is a substantial addition to himself. When he works he works with the added influence which it bestows. His energy is the product of his original resources, together with all he has succeeded in making his own. It exercises, therefore, with every effort a larger amount of acquisitive power, and secures a correspondingly larger return. It is exactly in this way that money accumulates, by the process of what is known as compound interest. It is thus a business is built up and enlarged. If it be founded on right principles, and have the requisite material to start with, it will extend itself securely, carrying into each new development the principles of its origin, applying them over a wider field, and increasing accordingly the sources of its revenue. It will, therefore, contain in itself the guarantee alike of its stability and of its success. On the other hand, if it be reared on a floating or vicious foundation, however rapidly it may rise into prominence and multiply its transactions, its initial weakness is sure to betray itself. Sooner or later the whole structure will come to the ground, and the original capital itself disappear in the swollen bubble of fictitious gains. It is the same, also, with regard to intellectual pursuits. The man who knows the rudiments of a thing thoroughly, with a clear understanding of their meaning, has really mastered the whole of that subject. His further progress is merely a matter of time, and of learning to follow up the lines that lie plainly before him. He moves on without knowing very well how he moves, every effort becoming less arduous, while the rate of advance becomes more rapid. But if you begin with a desultory knowledge, and without understanding the significance of what you know, all that you afterwards gain will be



simply learned by rote, or put together in a haphazard way, without any notion of the law of its connection, or any idea why it ought to be one thing rather than another. Should you ever require to turn it to account, you will find yourself involved in hopeless confusion. And the likelihood is that in a few years the whole will have slipped away from your grasp. It is not a new law, therefore, which our Lord propounds to us here, but one entirely consistent with the whole of our experience. He simply declares that spiritual property is held like property of any other kind, and accumulates or diminishes according to the same general rule.

In order to bring this out a little more clearly, let us consider, first of all, the precise nature of the distinction between the man who has and the man who has not, as these terms are used in my text.

I. The first half of the verse asserts that unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance, or in other words that in the case of every man who has his property shall not remain stationary, but certainly grow. As this is not a result that follows as a matter of course from the mere fact of possession, it is evident the solution of the saying depends on the sort of possession described by the word "hath." Everything is held by a tenure corresponding to itself. If it be something external, such as real or movable estate, your ownership consists in power to exercise over it certain rights which cannot be interfered with except by your consent. If it be something inward, such as knowledge of a particular craft or accomplishment, your ownership consists in your possessing it as part and parcel of yourself, and in your ability to bring it into play whenever you choose. Wherever you go it goes along with you, and it cannot exist where you are not. For instance, the man who

has acquired the art of swimming has learned to use his physical faculties according to a particular style or method of action, and the man who is a trained mathematician has learned to use his intellectual faculties according to another. Both have acquired a power which is part and parcel of themselves, and which they can put into operation at will in the requisite way. If this holds true of a mere intellectual or even physical habit, it is much more true of all that affects character and our relation to spiritual truth. It is evident we cannot be said to have made a truth our own till we have made it part of ourselves. Otherwise it remains separate from us, and our connection with it is uncertain and precarious. It is quite possible we may act without it, and our activity be wholly uncoloured by its influence. It is equally possible it may refuse, in consequence, to associate itself with us, so that we shall find it has ceased to be amenable to our control. A man whose sincerity is assumed or put on, and not an integral portion of himself, may very probably put it off, and act deceitfully under the pressure of some passing temptation. He may even do this so frequently that he will find it impossible to do anything else, and become habitually dishonest or untruthful. Sincerity will remove itself so completely beyond his reach that he will not be able to lay hold of it, though he wishes to do so. Now, in order to bring about such an assimilation or fusion of one thing with another, there must be at least a potential likeness or congeniality of character between them. Just as oil will not mix with water, or as no substance will be serviceable for food unless it be adapted to our physical organs, so no virtue or excellence can pass into the fibre of our moral nature unless there be a certain fitness to receive it. And every truth contained

in the Gospel is intended to do this. Every fact we are told about the ministry of Christ is meant to convey to our minds a particular impression regarding Him. Even those matters that seem to lie far beyond its range are revealed to us in new relations, and are completely vitalized by the virtue of His sacrifice. Religion is invested with a new character, because it is pervaded by a new purpose—its purpose being to bring us into sympathy with Christ, and to make that sympathy so powerful and complete that it shall bring our whole lives into unison with His. It is quite impossible, therefore, that a single article in the Christian creed should inhere in a man's nature, or a single Christian grace adorn it, unless there be a predisposition in its favour, some spiritual point of contact with it. What, for instance, can the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ be to one who is not sensible of anything in himself which makes it necessary he should have a Divine Saviour? What will the death of Christ be to us if sin is only a misfortune or a mistake, and not a fatal violation of the everlasting law of righteousness? What will His resurrection be if we are unconscious of any paralysis of our moral strength, if we do not feel that our life ought to be fuller, purer, and higher than it is? And if you look at the practical side of Christianity, or at those duties to which its doctrines are designed to lead, you will find precisely the same thing. How can a man be truly moderate if he has no liking for moderation? He may force himself into abstinence from certain indulgences, owing to politic or selfish reasons; but he is really an immoderate man who assumes moderation. No one is pure or forgiving who would secretly prefer to be the reverse if he could only dare to give the reins to his passion. These qualities can be considered his

only as borrowed goods can be considered the property of him who borrows them, or as a man's opinions can be considered his when he holds himself at liberty to change them according to circumstances. And not only so: there must not only be this congruity between a man and any moral truth or quality before he can possess it, there must also be a positive desire on his side to have it. If there be no appetite even the most suitable and necessary food may be left untouched or rejected with dislike. And it not infrequently happens that one may see quite clearly his need of a greater deliverance than he can effect for himself, and recognise Christianity as providing it without deciding to accept the provision. He may even go farther than this, and have a considerable desire to enjoy it, and a sincere admiration for the type of character it tends to produce, and yet be withheld from embracing it by a stronger desire for something else. But if our sin and moral weakness be so acutely felt as to claim our first and most earnest attention, and the Gospel be apprehended as fully satisfying the demands of both, it will kindle a preference which nothing will be able to dispute. What you do not really care for you may be tempted to throw away or exchange for something more pleasing when it comes. But when you are persuaded that a thing is absolutely the best, there is no fear of your parting with it then. It is clung to more tenaciously than anything else just in proportion to the measure of its superiority. Being better than life, it may be said to be yours more inseparably than life itself, for you would rather lose your life than suffer the loss of it.

The second characteristic of spiritual possession is that whatsoever a man has in this way he uses. This is plainly set forth in the parable to which my text is

appended. The man who had one talent lost it because he had failed to improve it. The man who had five received the lost one in addition to his own, because he had shown himself capable of turning it to account. In his case the money was an instrument with which he worked. He operated with it as though it were part of himself, much as one might do with a limb or member of his body. His activity passed into it, his will expressed itself through it, so that it formed a piece of his personal property very much as our limbs do. A man whose arm is leprous or paralyzed can hardly be said to have it at all. It is just as useless to him as though it had ceased to be. Money that is hoarded up or hid in the earth is almost equally ownerless. It is of no more service to its nominal possessor than if it belonged to somebody else. A field that lies continually fallow might as well be struck off the acreage of its lord. Indeed this might be done with manifest advantage, as it would probably add to production in more active hands. And so it is evident that the use we make of a thing is a searching test of the nature of our possession. If we fail to use it we show either that our power over it is incomplete, or that we consider it undeserving our attention. In regard to spiritual matters this is even more signally true. If a man does not use his generosity by being generous, you argue quite correctly, it is because he has none. If he asserts that he has certain gifts or accomplishments, but never exhibits them, you naturally suspect their existence. If he professes Christianity, but fails to discover its special characteristics, you fear he is professing to have what he does not truly possess. Indeed you only become conscious of your own powers through being able to bring them into use. You cannot know that you

can think until you have used your power to think, nor be persuaded of your ability to achieve a result till you have used that ability with success. And that man is surely cherishing a delusion who thinks he is a Christian when he cannot act like one; or supposes he has this or that spiritual endowment, when he cannot put it forth. If you have a knowledge of Christ's death and of His resurrection from the dead by the glory of the Father, and yet cannot use that knowledge to do deeds and accomplish results which you could not otherwise attain; if all you know of Christ does not avail to beat back temptation, and enable you to bear the trials of life with a more equal and hopeful heart; if you cannot handle it so as to subdue your pride, and cannot let it work out of you so as to express the mind that was in Him, your knowledge is surely a dead and worthless thing. You have not learned the word of God and inwardly digested it, nor has it passed into your system as so much additional energy. It remains wholly outside of you, and might be taken away without your life being materially affected by the change.

So much, then, for the distinction which our Lord means us to draw between him who has and him who has not. The man who has the truth is the man who has made it one with himself, and gives evidence of this by acting it out or using it in his daily life. Anyone else has only the semblance of possession. He may carry it about with him, and be able to describe it in the most eloquent terms, but he no more has it than the school-boy who carries Euclid in his pocket has the knowledge of the great geometer, or than the man who knows about the doctrines of Luther has the faith of the Reformer.

II. We have now to consider in the second place the



consequences that follow from this "having" and "not having" respectively. Unto him that hath, we are told, shall be given, and he shall have abundance. Here again it is useful to remind ourselves how completely this spiritual law finds its parallel in the rule we observe in other matters. We do not continue making gifts to persons who show themselves unfit or unwilling to use them. We rightly consider that to be waste. But if a man appreciates what we bestow, and applies it to the purpose for which it was given, we immediately feel it is safe in his hands. We have the greatest encouragement we can desire for making him the recipient of still farther confidence. Or if this be thought too mechanical an illustration of a thing so vital and self-developing as truth, look at the case of the husbandman. If he uses his seed well he receives a return of twenty or thirty fold. It is a law of nature as well as of grace that whoever makes a thing work—that is, uses it according to its nature—will get out of it an ample compensation and reward for his pains. So then, if you have the truth it will multiply itself in your hands. You are to understand it is not a thing to be hoarded up, as though, all you had to do with it was to keep it from being stolen, and enjoy a cautious glance at it now and then in secret. The sure way of preserving what you have is to act upon it, and suffer it in turn to be acted upon by the various and healthy influences congenial to its growth. Thus it will wax stronger, and become so robust you may safely trust it to take care of itself, and stand even rough weather without scathe. What would you think of the man who, having received some particularly rare and precious seed, insisted on keeping it locked up in his granary, because of the many dangers that would threaten it if committed to the ground? You



would feel that he had taken the surest way of losing it altogether, and that nowhere was it so safe, or so likely to profit him, as in the very place where he feared to put it. You may depend upon it, the same holds good with regard to all your knowledge of the things of God. Work with it as much as you can. Are you doubtful whether you trust Christ or not? Try if you cannot work with your faith. Try if you cannot get yourself into some kind of action on the strength of what you know about His mercy and power. See if it will not sustain you to do something for Him which you may not have attempted hitherto, if it will not help you to be more unselfish and pure and forgiving. Experiment upon your knowledge. Find out what pressure it will bear, what motive power it will bring into play. For you surely do not wish simply to possess a few notions about Christianity, or to be acquainted with the Gospel of Christ in no other way than the infidels who reject it, or the sceptics who take it to pieces. You wish to experience its redeeming effects. You feel that you need to be delivered from sin, and to have a new moral stimulus imparted to your nature. And you wish to be conscious of this deliverance. You long to feel strength rising like a tide within you, to conquer evil with less violent and exhausting effort, to do good and generous things with greater ease, and more as a matter of course. Well, then, there is no other way of securing this than by being a doer of the word. Do not be satisfied with hearing the same things about Christ over and over again, and yet being precisely in the same position as you were. Beware of allowing His messages to appeal time after time to your heart, while your life remains, notwithstanding, as if He had never sent you a message

at all. If you continue to do this you will never advance a single inch. You will remain in your original position, and become every day more impervious to the movements of divine grace. What you have to do is to subject your convictions and the whole of your spiritual furnishings to the strain and service of practical life. If they are not worth much you will soon find it out, and the sooner the better ; and if they have substance or reality about them, they will issue from the ordeal stronger than ever, and with a thirst besides for further endeavours that will lead you on from victory to victory. Only do not expect that you are to have abundance all at once. The child requires to be taught the value of pence and how to use them before he can be trusted with pounds. And we know very well that, as a rule, this lesson is never learned till he is taught first to make money on his own account. He begins to understand then, by the labour necessary to earn it, how much it is worth, and to be more careful of how he employs it. Besides, he acquires the art of making his pounds for himself, and therefore the right to dispose of them, a right which cannot be established truly in any other way. Now, like children, we often wish for a great deal more than we are capable of using, and we are equally averse to the slow and somewhat painful process of being taught. We fancy that if we received a great measure of spiritual power—larger visitations of joy and ecstasy—we should show an extraordinary measure of devotion, and do wonderful things for the Kingdom of God. But we forget that these things do not come in an arbitrary way, but presuppose in us a state of mind fit to improve them. A man who has had little acquaintance with the evil of sin and the treachery of the human heart,

who knows little of the wonderful variety of ways by which God's will fulfils itself in the history of His Church, would almost certainly be embarrassed and overbalanced by such an abundance of benefits. Self-confidence might prove his ruin, or ignorance mar his efforts, or enthusiasm run into fanaticism, and plunge him into deplorable excesses. We must submit to the slow but sure methods of divine discipline. We must grow into the capacity of using God's greater gifts by practising well the use of His smaller ones. We must learn lessons of self-denial and self-crucifixion even, and the more light and gladness we are able to enjoy the more we shall receive. But we shall not receive what our clumsy and untutored hands would only disfigure and abuse. We shall not obtain before severe spiritual training what cannot profit us until we have endured it. We have always to remember that what is really of moment is the basis of character, that the great thing, therefore, is to mould and educate this, and that if we had all manner of gracious luxuries and enjoyments showered upon us, without having it brought into such a condition of culture as to make it a natural and fitting thing we should have them, they would be a positive bane instead of a blessing. The incongruity would be sure to betray itself in inconsistencies and extravagances of the most fantastic and fatal kind. Be patient and persevering. Be as methodical and earnest in your religion as you are in other things. Do not be disappointed that you cannot always measure your progress, nor see the store you have in hand growing visibly under your eyes. Disappointments are but the rough places in the road that leads on to fulfilment. The seed grows first underground, and has often afterwards to fight against the frost and bend before the bitter wind; but

for that very reason it may turn out a hardier plant, and bear a fuller fruitage in the harvest time. So do you press on, and be of a good courage. The abundance will come and not fail. Every effort you make, every temptation borne and overcome, every chastisement bowed to in the spirit of meekness, and every defeat rallied from and repaired, is bringing you nearer and nearer the haven of rest. Suddenly, it may be, after passing through some dark Valley of the Shadow of Death, where your spirit had almost sunk within you, and your feet had well-nigh slipped, you will emerge with a larger and firmer grasp of truth, and with a feeling of more ample and secure enjoyment.

In the last words of the verse our Lord refers to a process which is exactly the reverse of that which I have now been describing. It is the experience of the man who "hath not," or as St. Luke puts it, only "seemeth to have," and eventually loses his possession. This, as we have seen, refers to those who have never received or used the truth, however familiar they may be with its terms. It is to them as a talent hid in the earth, or a set of ideas or opinions to which they have never ventured to give effect. It is a common delusion with such persons that the truth being always at hand they may keep it waiting as long as they like, and will find themselves after five or twenty years, so far as it is concerned, just where they were before. But though the truth does not change, we are all changing without a moment's intermission, and our spiritual surroundings are changing also. If you persist in refusing obedience to Christ now, you are surely rendering yourself less and less capable of ever yielding it at any time. The whole array of motions that act upon the will must gradually lose their intensity. The

thought of retribution will become less dreadful, till it almost ceases to disturb the conscience. The evil of sin, that once, it may be, filled you with horror, will accustom you to its presence, till you no longer become so uneasy as you did. The loving acts and pitiful sufferings of Christ will grow more distant and indistinct. The Gospel will be but a name that stands for a vague group of distasteful unrealities. And more than this, moral distinctions will lose their clearness. What used to stand out dark and repellent against the bright light of divine holiness, will become confused in colour, and settle down into a neutral tint. What used to shock your sense of delicacy, or startle you into indignation and scorn, will only provoke an indulgent smile, or a passing remark about the frailty of poor human nature. Finally, you will become stiffened into a fixed posture of unbelief. Not that you will have openly dismissed the thought of redemption from your mind, or withdrawn your recognition of the divinity of Christ, but you will have made yourself morally incapable of accepting Him and the vast revolution which that would imply over the whole region of inveterate habit. Perhaps, Brethren, we may see an allusion in the words of Jesus to something more dark and mysterious still. For it is not said that he who hath not shall one day *lose* that which he hath, but that it shall be taken away. And we know how there seems a power in everything to attract to itself what wears a kindred character. Where the carcasses are, there the eagles are gathered together. Where corruption or death sets in, you find the destroyers mustering about ready to pounce upon their prey. So it is in the tragic experiences of human life. When you let go all practical hold on a truth of Christ the

birds of the air snatch it away. When life forsakes your profession of religion, when it comes to be dead and loathsome to God, then swoop down upon it the myrmidons of evil. Temptations grow more frequent and audacious. You are hurried hither and thither before their restless and bewildering violence, your early visions of bliss are now no more. Your prayers have passed into mockery. All your aspirations after goodness and manliness are gone. You have lost even the little things which you once imagined were inalienably yours.



VII.

*TEMPTATION.*



"There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear : but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able ; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it."—1 COR. x. 13 (R.V.).

## VII.

### *TEMPTATION.*

WHEN this Epistle of St. Paul's was written there was no city that embraced all that was distinctive of the ancient world more perfectly than Corinth. During the last hundred years it had been rapidly regaining the place it occupied before Rome extinguished the last spark of Grecian independence. Then it was levelled with the dust, and for long lay in apparently irreparable ruin. But it was destined a second time to rise into prominence. The quick eye of the first Cæsar saw its importance at a glance, both as a military key commanding the whole peninsula, and as a central emporium for commerce. Under his care it revived again. Strangers flocked to it from all quarters. Jews, Greeks, and Romans poured into its gates. Trade returned, wealth increased, art and letters found there a congenial home, and the proud pre-eminence that once had been the prerogative of Sparta or of Athens was now transferred to her.

But Corinth had become notorious for other things besides her commerce and refinement. Luxury and licentiousness had spread like a cancer among her citizens. Practices the most sensual were consecrated as religious rites by their connection with the worship

of her chief goddess, and "to behave like a Corinthian" had come to be a by-word in those days, describing a life that had parted with every vestige of restraint. It was a gay, fascinating, brilliant place, where the world seemed to hold a constant carnival; of all places one of the hardest for a Christian to live in. Nothing in the social or domestic life of his city gave him any help. At once he became a butt for the wit and raillery of a people who were perfect masters of sarcasm, while every step he took exposed him to the loss of friends, expulsion from his home, and the severance of all the ties that are most sacred in life. Then when he turned from all this to find shelter and repose within the Church itself, what did he discover there? His brethren split up into three or four parties, each on the eve of excommunicating the other; some feasting at sacrifices offered to idols, others denouncing them as false to their profession; some doubting the resurrection of the dead, or openly denying it as involved in absurdity, others defending it as the very essence of their faith. In short, he found disputes and differences about points of practice and points of doctrine, difficulties within the Church as well as difficulties without, enough almost to make him despair of fighting the good fight and laying hold on eternal life. How welcome to such an one to be assured that all this confusion was neither unforeseen nor unprovided for! There was nothing in it that made it impossible to live a brave and conquering Christian life. He was only passing through trials that men could bear, and God, who is faithful, would not suffer him to be tempted beyond measure; but with the temptation would also make the way of escape.

Here, then, we have the encouragement given to a

Church that was sorely tempted to inconsistency and unfaithfulness. This was the position on which they were to fall back, and within which they would always be secure. It consists, you will notice, of two lines of defence, both of which rest upon a third. The first is that none of our temptations, even the severest and most exceptional, will exceed our powers of endurance. The second is that with every one there will also be provided a corresponding means of escape. And the guarantee by which both of these is made certain is the faithfulness of God.

I. First, then, none of our temptations exceed our powers of endurance. This does not imply that we shall always overcome whenever we are tempted, but it does imply that we always may. In other words, it conveys the assurance that we shall never be placed where to sin will be a necessary or inevitable thing. God will so adjust our surroundings we shall always be able to serve Him and do what is right in spite of all inducements to deny Him and do what is wrong. Not that it will ever cease to be an arduous thing to live as He would have us, or that temptation will be otherwise than a dangerous foe. There are some characteristics that identify Christian experience in all ages; and this is one of them, that it must work itself out in face of opposition. The opposition may change as society passes through different stages of development. It may vary in amount or in kind, but it will never so slacken or withdraw as to make the following of Christ an easy thing. On the contrary, it will ever be, at least at times, the hardest thing in all the world. If you have never found it so, you may be sure you have never yet begun to follow Him. And if you find it so hard you almost despair of holding on, then you are

only sharing an experience which multitudes have had besides.

But further, there will not only be hindrances without the Church, stubborn and unyielding enough if we be thoroughly in earnest, but there will also be obstacles within, just as there were in Corinth. These, indeed, are sometimes the worst and most perplexing of all. How beautiful is the vision of the Communion of Saints, the home of all that is lovely and pure, and of good report ! With what a large and generous hope we turn at first to the Church of Christ—the Church which He purchased with His blood, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. How sacred are its sacraments, how grand beyond conception is its mission, and how blessed are the very least and lowest in the kingdom of God ! Surely in her fellowship we shall have rest and intercourse without restraint, and a high and lofty enthusiasm that shall inspire with unfailing ardour. Surely the paltry rivalries and the jarring noises of the world shall never enter to disturb her hallowed harmony. But alas ! we often find instead what rudely conflicts with our ideal. We find differences, and even antagonisms, which are the unhappy and apparently unnecessary survivals of half-forgotten controversies. We find diversities of judgment about minor matters that have stiffened into obduracy, and impede unity of movement and effort. We find suspicion and readiness to take offence, a strange and cold indifference to everything that has set our hearts on fire, a charity that instead of growing into the stature of Christ, has never learned not to seek its own, or to throw its mantle over a brother's sin. It is a painful, but perhaps a needful, disappointment, and one of which we have been faithfully forewarned.

In the parable of the tares among the wheat, of the draw-net that gathered in its sweep the bad as well as the good, we are reminded there will always be in the Church much that is not Christian, though hidden under Christian forms. And were we to find in her only what would soothe and tranquillize, only what answers to our heart's desire, we might be tempted to rest there, as many are prone to do, instead of resting in Christ. But everywhere we meet with what falls short of our ideal, and points us on to Him. Everywhere something summons us to effort, or comes into sharp and startling collision with our dreams. The dust of conflict will never be laid. Checks and harassments will never disappear. But even where these abound the most, and do their best to overbear us, they shall never acquire such obstructive strength as to make it impossible to advance beyond them, and even by means of them to better things.

Now there is great ground of encouragement in this if we understand what it means. We are all apt to suppose there are difficulties in our path of a unique and exceptional kind. Some men have been so possessed by this conviction they have sought to improve their position by entering on some new line of life which seemed less impervious to Christian principle. This, of course, is a mistake, unless to remain as we are involves us in actual sin. It is never hinted at in the New Testament, even where it might have seemed the easiest and most natural method of relief. Not a word is said about retiring from the world, or passing from one employment into another. On the contrary, the Apostle distinctly declares, "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called." And you can see at once that this is the highest and most practical

wisdom. For we have not drifted into our present position by chance. And we have grown used to it, and, so to speak, have come to fit it. The likelihood is it exposes us to less friction than any other would. For every sphere of life has its peculiar temptations, and while we know something of those that meet us where we are, we know nothing of those that may meet us elsewhere. They might not perhaps be greater in themselves, but they might be greater and more perilous to us.

But to one patiently accepting his lot, and trying manfully to make the most of it, my text comes with very potent help. It may seem to you almost impossible to open your whole life everywhere to the elevating power of Christ's Gospel. All things seem to be against you, and to arrange themselves into a series of heartless rebuffs. It was quite otherwise when you never tried to serve God, and were content to live as your neighbours do. Then you found no fault with anything. You could be what you wished to be without interference or serious opposition. But now that you have begun to follow Christ, and bring all your nature into subjection to Him, you find unexpected obstacles on every side. Perhaps in your own home there may be much that materially hinders your progress. You may find scant sympathy and little encouragement where you naturally expected to receive the most. In business, too, it may be still worse. Habits and customs which you acquiesced in before as part and parcel of your profession, or the use and wont of your trade, you may feel yourself bound to condemn. It is a trying thing to be obliged to differ from old companions, and break with old associations, and encounter the sarcastic sneer about being righteous overmuch. It is a sharp



thing this Christianity, running like a sword right through a man's life, and cutting with its keen swift edge the good from the bad, the precious from the vile, saying,—Now all this must be embraced, and all that be striven against and put away. Still there is nothing in what you have to bear which may not be manfully borne. Be your lot and surroundings what they may, they need never be fatal to your service of Christ. He has not come to save us by taking us out of the world—which would be a virtual acknowledgment of weakness—or by shifting us from place to place and winning a doubtful triumph by adroit and skilful strategy. He has come to save us by a grace that brings salvation, and plants within us a hopefulness and strength that can work its way through every obstacle, just because it comes from Him who Himself has overcome them. Wherever you are, therefore, from that very point you may advance to sure, complete, and final conquest. If the way is not open, it will open in proportion as you press manfully on.

Again, perhaps you have found that there are special duties which you have failed hitherto to penetrate with the power of Christian principle. Whenever you approach them you leave behind you the very motive that ought to inspire them. They seem to lie outside the reach of its influence, and they might be done just as you do them, though you knew nothing of Christ, and had never come under obligations to serve Him. The number of these will probably appear to increase as you clearly apprehend what God would have you to be. The more you grow in spiritual purity and insight, the more you will become conscious of defects, and the more will a sense of them abide upon your mind. The advance you have to make will appear to be greater,



the distance between you and the goal will stretch out into a longer interval. Still here, too, these things have not been put in your way to discourage or defeat you. Obstacles never paralyze effort till hope dies or begins to languish. On the contrary, they stimulate and brace to further exercise. The momentary arrest of progress quickens the desire to get on. The more certain the ultimate success, the more strenuous and undaunted is the struggle to surmount the barriers that stand in its way. Look, therefore, at your sources of encouragement as well as your trials. Temptations must not be fought with single-handed, or with your eye only upon your foe. The hand must grasp the promised strength, and the eye must measure the resources placed at your disposal. ~~And be sure if any man can be a Christian you are that man.~~ If the Gospel declares it possible to overcome and be faithful unto death, and have an abundant entrance into the Kingdom of Christ, then it is possible for you. You have started from the same starting-point as every other. You are only meeting with temptations which in some shape everyone must meet. You have the same promises and the same encouragements which everyone enjoys. There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear.

II. The second ground of support furnished by my text is, that with every temptation God will also make a way of escape that we may be able to bear it. This is but an application of the general law that Christ's grace is sufficient for us, and covers the whole extent of our need. For every duty which God imposes He provides the strength to discharge it; for every service to which He summons He gives the promise of the requisite help. You will observe that He is said here

to make the temptation as well as the way of escape. Nor is this without a purpose. He knows precisely the strength we need, because He has prepared the occasion on which we shall be called to use it. It will never fail through any miscalculation or ignorance on His part. It will never be too feeble or too long upon the way. ~~You~~<sup>W. P.</sup> may always be sure His succour will be at hand, a very present help in every time of trouble. Even in those moments in which ~~your~~<sup>u. s.</sup> temptation comes upon ~~you~~<sup>u. s.</sup> most suddenly, so that it may seem to have taken even God Himself by surprise, His way of escape will be close beside ~~you~~<sup>u. s.</sup>. For the swiftest and most unforeseen of temptations are all equally under His control. He has sent them for wise and salutary reasons, and He will not be behindhand with His support. As all the circumstances of life are of His ordering, so are all the trials that spring out of them. He will not crush or overwhelm you with the weight of His burden. He will not press upon you with the force of an inexorable fate, heedless of the frailty and weakness of its victims. He deals out His trials with a tender hand, adjusting them with uttermost wisdom to the capacity of each. He never breaks the bruised reed, nor quenches the smoking flax.

But how is it He makes a way of escape? He does not withdraw His temptation, or divest it of its force. For this would be to defeat the very purpose for which He has sent it. And this purpose is to develop by exercise the strength we possess, and train it into greater maturity, patience, and self-restraint. Without this we should soon lose the little energy we have. It would grow feeble and flaccid for want of use, just as the muscles of the body relax and lose

their tension when the limbs are in constant rest. So every trial we endure is the gain of so much moral vigour. We have called up and put forth effort. We have exerted ourselves, and we are the better of the exercise. Whereas if the temptation were removed we should only be confirmed in our feebleness, we should never know our resources, nor learn to utilize them, and relief would be purchased at the expense of progress. God, then, does not take away our temptation any more than He took away St. Paul's thorn in the flesh. He gives us strength to bear it; and we escape it by not only avoiding the sin to which it leads, but by using it as a stepping-stone to farther attainment. We rise through it to a higher elevation than yet we had reached.

There is one thing, however, which we must not forget. This way of escape must be sought for, or it may not be found. It is not always so forcibly obtruded, we must see it as a matter of course. It reveals itself to the humble and watchful eye—the eye that has become single, and waits only upon God. And if we are tempted, and can see no mode of relief, then we must search for it. Gradually it will open and widen before us. In our very praying we shall enter into it, and by our very prayer we shall pass through it into larger liberty and strength. It is because we often meet temptation so lightly, and resist it with so little earnestness and faith, it prevails so shamefully against us. There is a danger of trifling with sin, and of letting our thoughts play round it till it comes to lose its guilty character. There is a danger, also, of failing in heart when the struggle is long, and of reconciling ourselves to defeat as something inevitable. Too often this springs from a secret love of what we

pretend to avoid, or from being but half resolved to surmount the obstacle that stands in our way. We do not venture to taste the forbidden fruit, but we are very unwilling to forego the possibility of its enjoyment, or the pleasure of keeping it within our reach. Few Christians indeed have intended to transgress, compared with the number of those who only meant to tread upon dangerous ground. But it is perilous to try how closely you can come to the line that separates you from actual transgression without stepping to the other side. Rather turn your eyes in the opposite direction, and see how far you can put yourself from the region of danger. For if no temptation that emerges in the pathway of duty is to be fearfully shrunk from, lest duty itself be sacrificed in consequence, yet there are, so to speak, standing temptations, which are to be carefully shunned, as one would flee from a fever-haunted swamp or a plague-stricken city. And we must always treat sin not only as something with which we have ceased to do, but as a defeated and discredited foe. For this is what Christ has made it and shown it to be. Its whole strength and subtilty were expended on Him. But He bore the shock. He conquered our great adversary, and in him the sum of all those influences that traverse and poison human hearts. Henceforward they are subordinate to Him. They yield to His word. They disappear at His presence. He brings His helpless ones out of the net. And this victory of His was for us. It gives us the assurance He can make us also more than conquerors. Nothing is impossible for men that the Man Christ Jesus did. His life defines the capacity of redeemed humanity. Because He triumphed we can triumph also. Because He was tempted in all

points as we are, yet without sin, He is able also to succour them that are tempted.

III. We come now to the third ground of encouragement on which both the others rest. God is faithful. Therefore it follows that He not only controls the strength of temptation, but will also make us equal to the effort of sustaining it. Should we be disposed at any time to doubt this, we may reassure ourselves by remembering His faithfulness. For it is unmistakably involved. He cannot be true to His purpose of grace, and yet allow us to be overcome by the sheer weight and pressure of evil without a possibility of escape. For what is the purpose which we see revealed in the gift of Christ? It is that we may be saved from sin; and salvation from sin implies that we shall be strengthened against the temptations by which it seeks to prevail. For though there are sins which seem to be committed without provocation, and continually surprise us by the apparent absence of anything to explain them, this is not so much the case with Christian men who trust in Christ, and look to Him to cleanse and sanctify their lives. Such do not sin from the mere love of sinning. The bare, naked act of disobedience has in itself no overpowering charm. They have been taught to see the true character and quality of evil. They have discovered its inward drift and tendency, and the mask has been so entirely stripped from its features they can never heartily love or be reconciled to it again. When they do sin it is mainly through the speciousness of some temptation. Sin disguises itself, and for the moment is not recognised. Some spasm of passion or excitement carries the soul beyond the usual and carefully observed limits of action. Or in some hour of indolence or spiritual slumber the enemy seizes his opportunity,

and strikes before the blow can be successfully parried. In any case it is not so much the sin itself that carries the day as certain favourable conditions under which it comes. And when we consider our own weakness, and the endless ways in which it may steal a march upon us; when we think how it takes such pitiless advantage of our sorrows and joys, our moments of excitement and our hours of depression; when we think of its constant alertness and wily watching for opportunities, together with our own foolish presumption in entering into treacherous companionships, we may well fear and wonder how we can pass through the ordeal without scathe. But here is the ground of encouragement, the source of consolation. God is faithful to His purpose, and His purpose is to save and keep all those who put their trust in Him. He never departs from this. He has it always before Him. It is the end to which He makes everything subordinate. He is never off His guard, never asleep, never too busily engaged to attend to the wants of the very least of His children. Sin can lurk nowhere without being detected by His all-seeing eye. It can devise no stratagem without being clearly visible to Him. Still less can it strike down or fatally wound any who look to Him for help. "Fear not, therefore. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and not one of them falls to the ground without your Heavenly Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

But not only would it be inconsistent with His purpose of grace were God to suffer overwhelming evil to assail us, it would also place Him in contradiction to Himself. And this cannot be. His actions are never at variance with His nature, though sometimes they may seem to us to be so. We see them but in part,



and cannot grasp their drift or relations as a whole. But His nature is to love goodness supremely, and He has pledged Himself by the gift of His Son to leave nothing undone to give it the victory. But if He were to stand aside, and see us beaten down by sin without interposing ; if He were to allow temptations to muster in irresistible force ; this would not only defeat His manifested purpose, but destroy His character for holiness. The very fact that God is good, that He loves and cherishes with a compassionate eye every movement of a human soul to purity and truth, involves His doing everything that wisdom, and power, and pity can do to make us triumphant over sin. Let us, therefore, be of good courage. To be called upon to fight against this foe includes us in the great band of those who in all ages have been waging God's holy warfare against the evil one. If at times you have to stand where the struggle is fiercest, and the onward rush and pressure of the foe threatens to bear you down, remember that Christ is in the midst of the battle. His presence is the guarantee of victory. Meanwhile, till the hour of final triumph come, He can help you to endure. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able."

VIII.

*THE CHARACTER OF ESAU.*



"Looking diligently . . . lest there be any . . . profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."—HEB. xii. 15, 16.

## VIII.

### *THE CHARACTER OF ESAU.*

THERE are certain features of character which, if they do not exactly enlist our admiration, never fail to secure our good will, and an instinctive sympathy with those who possess them. They are not of necessity the noblest, and though sometimes allied with these and found in their company, are just as frequently found without them. Indeed it is this that gives them much of their popularity. Excellence of the highest type repels more than it attracts. It makes us too conscious of our own inferiority. What we like best is an average quantity of goodness. The piety that carries about with it a large capacity for accommodation, and can square itself well with the world when occasion calls, is the most popular piety. The man who along with his virtues, which by reason of their very nature lift him above many of his fellows, combines a few of those failings which bring him down again to their level, is by far the greatest favourite. Good men are glad to acknowledge his goodness, and for the sake of it are disposed to deal gently with his inconsistencies. The multitude find that they, too, have a share in him, and are pleased to recognise their own features in such respectable and perhaps unusual company. Now it is

just such a character as this of which it is most difficult to form an impartial estimate. And it is all the more difficult if the good qualities in question are of that striking and aggressive sort which almost disarm and disable criticism. For there are qualities that act in such a way. It seems, for instance, almost impossible to resist the impression which energy makes upon our minds, especially the energy that throws itself out upon the broad arena of practical life, and produces visible and manifest results. These we see and marvel at, but the force behind them remains a thing unseen, which may do even more than it has done as yet, and whose actual measurement must remain a matter of wondering and vague conjecture. Nor is this feeling lessened, but perhaps increased, if the energy work fitfully and with an apparent elevation above rules and precedents. It becomes invested, then, with a larger atmosphere of mystery. It has that secrecy about its source and the method of its movement which seems to lift it up into the inscrutable region of inspiration. You never can be quite sure how and when it will operate. Its greatest attainments may only be the earnest of greater ones still to come, the experimental preludes of something unspeakably more startling and strange. It keeps you accordingly in a state of suspense, and your judgment for the time is forced into the background, or so much dazzled it is unable to act with its usual steadiness. The same thing holds true, though in a less degree, of all that class of actions which we distinguish by the word "impulsive." We pardon a man a great deal for the sake of this particular temperament. It removes him from the run of his fellows, and from the rules which we are accustomed to apply to them. If he does what is wrong, it mitigates the wrong that it

was done on the spur of the moment, and not by a cool, deliberating wickedness. If he does what is good, it makes the good still better, because the goodness that acts spontaneously is more genuine than a habitual calculating virtue. Besides, we give more latitude to impulsive actions, because they break through the routine of things. We view them with an indulgent curiosity, and forgive much for the sake of the excitement and variety they provide. It is not everyone who can afford to travel faster than his neighbours, or discard the ordinary methods of safe locomotion, and allowance must be made for those who run the risk. Hence the popularity of what is vulgarly called dash, a quality we all naturally admire. It serves as a sort of flourish that relieves the monotony of life. And we watch any singular display of it as a man watches a game of chance, knowing there may be some brilliant successes, but just as likely some ruinous catastrophe. The character of Esau, as it is brought before us in Scripture, partakes largely of this element. He was if anything an impulsive man. He acted, that is, at the bidding of the desire that was strongest at the moment, and his desires rose with overpowering violence. Disappointment or delay they could not brook. Anything that came in the way only aggravated their strength, and was spurned aside with a reckless disregard of consequences. When he returns hungry from the hunt his birthright is thrown away for a single mess of pottage. Bereft of the blessing of the firstborn, he breaks out into loud uncontrollable grief, that passes into equally vehement hatred of the brother that has thwarted him. But he is capable of warm and generous affection. The very strength of his remorse reveals the depth of his emotions. There is

something indescribably touching, too, in his eager warm welcome of Jacob on his return from Mesopotamia. "He ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him." He could show a lordly magnanimity, as on the same occasion when he wished to refuse his brother's gift on the plea of his already having enough. [He had none of those faults which attach themselves to timid and more thoughtful characters, the tendency to equivocate, and compass an end by somewhat doubtful means, to bargain, and *finesse*, and sail close to the wind. There was none of that irresolution about him that comes of over-calculation, and which so often robs an action of its force, and a kindness of its grace, nor any of that fear which tempts to untruthfulness. A lie was as repugnant to his mind as an act of cowardice. He had no idea of beating about the bush, or reaching the goal by dint of stratagem. What he did he did openly, fearlessly, and in broad daylight. When he hated he hated without disguise, and when he loved it was with an equally open and unmistakable affection. A thoroughly natural man, and true son of the desert, restraint of every kind was intolerable to him, and he lived as if there were none.] A character like this shows, of course, all the more favourably when compared with such an one as that of Jacob. *His* faults spring, no doubt, from his peculiar temperament, but they are those which we regard with the greatest dislike. His virtues, on the other hand, had none of that spontaneity and freshness which makes an excellence doubly excellent, but were always unpleasantly prudential. They seem to have been developed only by infinite patience and a vast variety of discipline, and not to have come to very much after all. Yet Jacob

was the man on whom God's blessing rested, whose nature was the most susceptible of divine treatment, and most capable of receiving and transmitting the promise of the Covenant. Esau, according to the Scripture, was a profane man, with little or no capacity for the spiritual and unseen, unable to understand it, whose strong earthly instincts and exuberance of life repelled everything of the sort, or hardly admitted of its approach. Now when we find that Scripture reverses a popular verdict, it is worth our while to find out the reason, and as it always shows so just and penetrating an insight into human nature, we should be very careful of allowing ourselves to dissent from its judgment. On what, then, is our sympathy with Esau grounded? Why do we feel as if he had been hardly used? Does not the reason lie in our too partial estimate of that quality of impulsiveness which entered so largely into his character. He stands out as the representative of the warm-hearted, high-spirited man of the world, whose sins, because they scorn the grosser attributes of meanness, seem little more to us than acts of extravagance. The growths of a rich though wayward nature, they carry along with them a certain savour of its richness, that renders them somewhat less unpalatable. And the fact that now and then he can do most liberal things, be touched with poignancy of sorrow, or rise into an ardour of affection, seems to prove that he cannot be a bad man. It shows he has it in him to throw his sin aside, and rise above it, that there must be an inward fountain of goodness, that but for untoward and embarrassing conditions, would be certain to obtain the ascendancy. So we are inclined to argue. But the argument may be a mistake. For what determines the nature of a

man's life, and stamps his character as good or bad, is the course of it in the main. A few glimpses of sunshine, however bright, will not make a fine day, especially if it pours heavily throughout the intervals. The stream that lingers in its deep pools, and doubles on itself in doubtful windings through the plain, is none the less surely seeking for the sea. So we are not to imagine a man good or bad because the level of his life is broken up by occasional deeds of goodness or the reverse. We are to look at the tenor of the whole and discover, if we can, the sovereign motive that governs its drift. Now it is unfortunately true that much generosity and warmth of emotion may co-exist with serious moral weakness, that a man's nature may break out at times into admirable actions, while its habitual temper is rigidly selfish, nay, that these actions themselves may only be selfishness working in a somewhat unusual way. For what is impulsiveness but the tendency to act at the bidding of one's own feelings? And to indulge our feelings, irrespective of those of other people, what is that but selfishness? Considered in itself the impulsive temper is a selfish one. It is pleasant, no doubt, to live just as we fancy, to use our time, spend our money, settle our pursuits, and arrange our plans precisely, according to our own liking. And a man may do this in a lazy Epicurean sort of way, just as well as in a careless high-handed fashion; but in both cases he is working on a thoroughly selfish principle. If God had placed us in a wilderness, with such abundance of room on every side that nothing we did could affect our neighbours, then we should not require to consider them. But God has not so placed us. We stand to each other in such a variety of relations, through



ties of blood, business, and citizenship, that to insist on following our own bent is sure to do violence to some of them. We shall either do them injury by frequent collisions, or do them injustice by withholding their due. So that no man can take his own way in this world without inflicting suffering on others, imposing sacrifices upon them which he refuses to make himself, and abridging their liberty to enlarge his own. Nor must it be supposed that we can avoid or neutralize these results by doing now and then exceptionally kind and considerate things. Such actions are apt to serve as decoys. They catch our eye and divert it from the main current of a man's life. They come upon us, when they do come, as pleasing surprises, and we linger about them and think more of them just because of their rarity. But all the while the probability is, that these are no exceptions save in appearance. A man who habitually lives for himself will, almost unconsciously, act upon the same principle of selfishness even in those very instances in which he seems to have most thoroughly broken away from it. His good deeds are, in all likelihood, so many acts of expiation by which he tries to make up for cases of neglect. They are intended to arrest criticism and turn away reproof, as well as to soothe the uneasiness of conscience. This done, the risk of disturbance removed, and a period of immunity purchased, he will go on his way again, till pulled up by the old claims closing in upon him, and by the old voice interrupting his peace. Besides, even apart from such considerations, there is a subtle pleasure in being occasionally better than ourselves, in surprising people, and rising above their expectations, which is only another form of selfishness. It is as much as saying, "See how much more generous I am



than you supposed. What an injustice you have done me in concluding I am hard-hearted and inconsiderate !” And it flatters a man’s vanity to puzzle people’s judgment, and walk away leaving them in amazement. It seems to invest him with an air of mystery, and to make him out a deeper and profounder character than any of those he thinks he has bewildered. The same holds true, though in another way, of many seemingly magnanimous actions. They often dwindle down into paltry things when we discover the root out of which they spring. It ministers to our pride, and magnifies our self-importance, to bestow a benefit or grant an indulgence. For the time it puts us in the position of a superior, and we have a pleasing satisfaction in doing something that apprises our neighbour of the fact. It receives his acknowledgment, his thanks, perhaps his praise, and all this rises up to us as an incense of a sweet savour. We are gratified, flattered and float in a momentary atmosphere of serene complacence.

We must not be deceived, then, by the superficial attractiveness of the warm-hearted, impulsive type of character, nor forget that exceptional actions only prove their opposite to be the rule. Selfishness may disguise itself in a coat of many colours, and take its own way among a multitude of devices that seem to surround it with a contrary atmosphere, but which are all intended only to make room for it, and allow it to go on without interference. So long as a man lives to please himself, it makes little difference how often he dazzles our eyes or touches our hearts by the excellent things he may do ; he is at bottom a selfish man. Whatever he does, nothing will be willingly allowed to disturb his pursuits, diminish his

enjoyments, or impair his comfort. These untouched, he may give heartily, or sympathise freely, or kindle into a glow of enthusiasm; but these threatened, and fervour will cool, and the fountain of generosity be quickly staunched. It is only when a man's life involves him in self-denial; when it recognises the claims of others and the claims of God, and submits to adjust itself faithfully to these; when it gives up its own waywardness, and curtails its freedom, to add to the happiness and well-being of those around him; only in short, when he bows himself to the yoke of Christ, and begins to burden himself, as He did, with the sins and sorrows, the toils and struggles, of the world,—that he learns the first lesson in the school of Christianity, and truly practises the fear of God.

But it is not as a selfish but as a profane man Esau is held up as a beacon of warning; and by a profane man is meant one who has no perception of the sanctity of Divine things. Sacred ground in his eyes is just the same as any other, the surrounding fence that withdraws it from common use being quite invisible. Instead of taking his shoes off his feet ere entering its precincts, he carries into it the dust and traffic of the highway, and soils it with the stains of earthliness. But this profaneness simply describes the selfish man's character on that side of it which is turned towards God. The disposition which towards man is selfish, is towards God profane. It cannot be otherwise. Nothing is sacred to a selfish man except himself. All is sacrificed to the absorbing idol of his own will. To this everything must bow and do homage; and it secures respect or toleration, only inasmuch as it does so. Should it happen to stand out, and refuse submission, it is the object of perpetual

assault. The will of the man chafes and frets against it, every instance of contact increasing the irritation, and provoking murmuring and protest that will never cease till it wears itself out in self-exhaustion, or the obnoxious obstacle be overcome. But to acknowledge God, if it means anything at all, is to acknowledge a will superior to our own, one that rises up in impregnable strength, and inflexible in righteousness, that will not "bend with the remover to remove" or accommodate itself to our varying weakness. And thus it is that the most elementary acts of the religious life, whether of worship or obedience, are impossible to the man who is governed by selfishness. Every such act implies the abnegation of self. It is out of the death of this repugnant principle the life of the soul awakens. And every beat and stirring of its pulse, every outgoing of its energy is a suppression of our original impulse, and a triumph over its strength. It is easy, then, to see how the selfish man is profane. He has no such respect for God as moves him to obedience. He removes religion out of his way as a serious hindrance, or shuts it up within so narrow a compass it never comes into collision with himself. What else can he do, if it only thwarts and annoys him? If it gives him no pleasure, and adds nothing to his resources, is it to be expected that it should be found anywhere except amid the lumber of his life? And I fear, Brethren, it is only there the religion of some of us can be found at all, lying as an unused, dishonoured thing, unworthy of a place amid our furniture of daily use. The value of a solid marketable article you can easily understand. An undertaking which can be turned in a profitable direction will hold your attention and engage your labours. An enterprise which can

be worked so as to yield political capital, or give you a lift in the social ladder, or add to your influence in the neighbourhood, you can quite see has an appreciable worth of its own. But the facts of redemption, the truths of God revealed to us in the Gospel of Christ, by what scale of values do you measure these? Are you quite sure you do not postpone them to other things? Are you quite sure that while you freely allow them a kind of importance, that importance does not come after some substantial money-making interests which can be reckoned in pounds, shillings and pence? Is the blessing which Christ bestows so precious in your sight, you abandon everything that imperils your hold of it? Would you part with all rather than feel it slipping from your grasp, and sink down into the cold cheerless life that is without God and without hope in the world? Or is there no spiritual privilege you ever heard of, no spiritual enjoyment you ever tasted, which you would not sacrifice for a good dinner? Beware, lest there be any profane person among you like Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

But there is another reason besides those I have mentioned which has much to do with our sympathy with Esau, and that is his misfortunes. We are apt to look at him as the victim of a fraud, and it seems to us almost a contravention of justice that the impostor should flourish in the favour of God and his victim be disowned and cast aside. But this is a one-sided view of the occurrence and falls short of the truth. That Jacob acted the part of a deceiver is true, and nothing can be said to justify his deceit. And though it is also true that God made use of that deceit to accomplish His own ends, and transfer the blessing from the elder

to the younger born, it is not true that Esau was *defrauded* of the blessing. No man can be cheated out of a divine gift against his own will. God does not hold His benefits with so lax a hand, or dispense them with such indifference, as to allow them to be diverted from their destined possessor by the craft or subtilty of man or devil. Esau lost the birthright by his sin, sold it for a mess of pottage, and had himself and not his brother to blame for his calamity. It was the reluctance of Isaac to pass over his favourite son, the hasty distrustful spirit of Rebecca, unwilling to leave God to execute His purpose in His own way, and the moral weakness of Jacob, that combined to produce the stratagem so pregnant with sorrow for them all. But the birthright was gone from Esau irretrievably, and, hanging suspended over Jacob, was merely waiting, as it were, for some connecting medium of events to come down and invest him with the fulness of the promise.

But it was highly characteristic of Esau that he should not have seen this. It is the way of selfish, worldly men to resent exceedingly that their sin, should find them out. And having his father on his side, who had the blessing to bestow, it seemed to him a settled thing that he should receive it. The old affair of the pottage was not so serious, after all, and it would be absurd to suppose that so trifling a transaction would interfere with the stated rights of the eldest born. But though hand join in hand iniquity shall not go unpunished, and the conspiracy of sin was broken, and its purpose baffled, by an utterly unprecedented trick. It is a terrible illustration of the truth that as a man sows so shall he also reap; that every sin we commit instead of passing into the past

with the time that witnessed it, remains embedded among the forces of our life, that there it works and spreads, and dissipates its influence, till it brings us face to face with the measure of retribution. As surely as from the grain received into the ground there springs up after many days, it may be, of winter frost that has hardened the surface of the soil, and made it for a time impenetrable to the tender blade, the waving corn that is harvested with gladness, so from every separate act of sin there germinates, and grows, and ripens, its plentiful crop of tribulation that is gathered some day with bitter tears.

But even though it be granted that Esau suffered for his own fault, was not the suffering disproportioned to the sin? Was it not too trifling to be followed by so grievous a penalty? It might have been so if his sin had only consisted in the act that was the immediate occasion of his loss. But no sin stands by itself. And it is not the evil action that makes a man bad, it merely reveals the fact that he is bad. It is the outlet by which the inward wickedness issues into broad daylight, and publishes the fact of its existence. Esau was a profane man, not because he sold his birthright; but he sold his birthright because he was profane. Yet, inasmuch as sin is incomplete while it remains in our hearts, and God's action upon it cannot be clearly understood unless it is visible to men's eyes, Scripture attaches the punishment of Esau to the outward offence. That was the justification of the Divine procedure, and showed that the Judge of all the earth did right. It was because Esau had no apprehension of the worth of his birthright, but esteemed the promise which gave it its value a visionary and unsubstantial thing, he parted with it so easily. And this being so, it is



evident he was unfitted to enjoy it. It would never have been waited for, and allowed to shape and govern the course of his life, as was absolutely necessary in the case of him who should receive it. And there was nothing for it but to transfer it to some one who should watch over it with becoming pains, and yield himself to be fashioned by the hope of its fulfilment. It happened according to that saying of our Lord, "Unto him that hath shall be given, and he shall have more abundantly, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he seemeth to have."

And so, brethren, let us beware of cherishing a spirit of self-indulgence and of indolent yielding to our desires. There is nothing that grows upon a man so stealthily, and yet nothing that holds him in such a tyrannous grasp. If you are getting into the way of consulting your own ease so that your first aim is rather to make your life comfortable than to make it useful; if you are seeking to escape from the severer calls of duty, and thinking more of how to serve God pleasantly than of how to serve Him well, then you may be sure the leaven of worldliness is working in your heart. And who can be sure that among the manifold changes of life temptations may not emerge that shall prove too strong for you, and involve faith and a good conscience in shipwreck? Your nature may grow so soft and enfeebled by selfishness you will not be able to rouse yourself to the call of God. Some critical moment may arrive, some day of grace, when there shall be set before you with a freer and more abundant entrance than ever the open door of the Kingdom of God, and you will be too easy-going to be disturbed, too enervated by indulgence to arise and seize your opportunity. Or, to keep more closely

to the tragic example of my text, some long gratified desire may insist on being satisfied at the expense of fidelity to Christ. You may find that in some hour when you have least expected it you are faced with the alternative of denying yourself, or parting for ever with an interest in Him ; and if you have not been bearing the Cross and enduring hardness as a good soldier, if you have not been accustoming yourself to sacrifice your own will to the will of God, how terrible the risk that in that hour of everlasting issues you may fail to stand the test, and barter your birthright for a worldly lust !





IX.

*THE POWER OF CHRIST TO SAVE.*

“He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.”—  
HEB. vii. 25.

## IX.

### *THE POWER OF CHRIST TO SAVE.*

ACCORDING to this chapter there are two results that follow from the displacement of the Levitical priesthood by the priesthood of Christ. The first of these is, that we are enabled to draw near to God by an effectual purging of the conscience from sin, which the blood of bulls and goats could not accomplish. And the second is, that complete salvation is secured to those who so draw near. It is the second result which is stated in <sup>the</sup> ~~my~~ text. "Wherefore," that is, because Christ ever liveth to make intercession for us, "He is able to save to the uttermost those that come unto God by Him."

We have here, then, a brief but explicit statement, on the one hand, of the ability of Christ to save, and, on the other, of the ground on which that ability rests. To these two points I wish to draw your attention.

I. As to the ability of Christ to save—this is considered ~~under~~ <sup>in</sup> two different aspects: ~~as to its extent or~~ range, and ~~as to its~~ intrinsic efficacy. It extends to all those who come to God by Him. For though the word "all" does not occur in the passage, it is of course implied. The phrase is precisely analogous to our Lord's own words: "Him that cometh unto

Me I will in no wise cast out," which is equivalent to saying, "Everyone that cometh to Me shall certainly be received." Christ's power to save, then, embraces all who come to God by Him. No doubt He has power to save even those who neglect or refuse to come. But this thought is not present to the mind of the writer, who is contemplating the completeness of the salvation provided for those who come to God to obtain it, not the possibilities that are open to those who do not. What He assures us of is this, that everyone, without exception, who comes to God through Christ, will find in Him <sup>Christ</sup> a power that will effectually  
[secure his being saved. And this is a source of absolute and unqualified encouragement. For if you wish to come to God at all how are you to come unless it be by Christ? His interposition as a third person is not the introduction of a barrier that arrests or impedes your approach. On the contrary, as it is the aim of this Epistle to show, it is the one thing that makes that approach possible, and prevents it from being vain. For you cannot come to God in Himself just as you are. He is a remote impalpable presence, who retires in proportion as you advance, and who evades and eludes the embrace of the human heart. He may be a bright vision or an awful presence, but He will always remain above and beyond you, a Being with whom you can have no fellowship, and who renders you no conscious help in the hour of temptation or the article of death. Besides, you are sinful, and the more earnestly you try to reach Him, the clearer to your own consciousness becomes the gulf between you, and the strength of the power that holds you back. You must either renounce the hope of reaching God at all, and suffer Him gradually to vanish from your sight ;

or you must become content with a vague sentiment which will never quicken or sustain the heart, though it may invest your life with a certain measure of mystery and reverence. "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me." Now this definite knowledge of God, which otherwise we lack, and this restraint which is exercised by the power of our sin, is precisely what the intervention of Christ on the one hand provides, and on the other removes. In Him God becomes manifest in such a way as to be present clearly and powerfully to our thoughts. He is no longer an assemblage of qualities such as holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, which we painfully try to group together and cement into some sort of cohesion in our own mind. But in Christ all these receive their highest and purest conceivable expression, and are combined into the unity of a living Person, whose history lives before us in the pages of the Evangelists, and is impressed with an individuality at once most definite, unique, and indelible. Indeed, if you choose, you can know Christ better than those who are nearest to you on earth, and can have a much greater certainty as to His will. Moreover, in Him the mercy of God towards sinners, of which we have otherwise no assurance, works out for itself a perfectly free and unambiguous channel. In His sacrifice the claims of justice are satisfied, and satisfied by a love that willingly submits to the last extremity to achieve its beneficent end. Accordingly when you find my text declaring of this Saviour that He can save all who come to God by Him, and stands thus as Mediator between the Holy One and sinful men, it announces the complete solution of a hitherto insuperable difficulty. It shows you the nearness of Him with whom in this matter you have first of all

to do, and how He removes the guilt that excludes from the Divine fellowship by the sacrifice of Himself. This His atonement opens His arms to the whole world, and presents Him in the attitude of an inviting and pitiful Saviour. Not to strike is His hand reached forth, but to help. Not to avenge is His arm uplifted, but to bring salvation, and beckon the weary and heavy laden to His rest. As One who will without fail bring you to God, as One who can forgive all your iniquities, and heal all your diseases, He calls you to Himself. If you think you can find God without Him, you must either be ignorant of God Himself or of your own sin, or of both. The Pharisee went boldly forward into the Temple court, and imagined that he was drawing near the invisible presence. But it was a foolish and mistaken thought, and the ground of his confidence was that he was not as other men are—in other words, that he was no sinner. The Publican stood afar off, yet was near the Divine favour, because he knew his sin, and at the same time trusted in that mercy which had been but dimly disclosed to him, but has been clearly revealed to us in the person of Christ. When He cries it is God's mercy that cries, a mercy that is boundless because it rests on a propitiation for the whole world.

And if you wish to come to God there is nothing to hinder and everything to help you. Christ does not block the way, but opens it. "I am the door." No one is met with a refusal, for every possible ground of refusal He has Himself abolished. If you have wandered as far from God as it is possible for a human soul to go, you have not reached a point to which Christ has not come. For He came to seek and to save that which was lost, to preach peace to them that are afar off. If your sin is so great that pardon seems to you impossible, that is

because you are measuring God's mercy by your own standard and not by His, for He has declared that where sin has abounded grace has much more abounded. If you say your heart is too hard to be subdued and moulded by the will of Christ, that again is because you are judging of His power by your own, or at least because you take it at your own estimate instead of at His. And this is just where the root of the difficulty lies. A man who cannot forgive himself thinks that God cannot forgive him either. When you cannot break the fetters of your own sin, you cannot believe it is possible to break them at all. In short, Christ becomes to you very much what you yourself are. You invest Him with as much strength as you possess, and you limit Him with the weakness that bounds and circumscribes your own efforts. But that is precisely what we are warned against. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord." In other words, we are not to reduce God to our own stature, and then come to our conclusions as to what He can do for us. We must go to Scripture itself for our knowledge of Him. We must go to Christ's own words to learn what He can do. And we must correct and enlarge our natural notions of His character and purpose by what He declares explicitly about Himself. Especially must we widen our conceptions of His mercy, removing persistently one after another those innumerable limitations which our unbelief has imposed upon it, till it coincides exactly with His own word. "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out."



None have failed of salvation because Christ could not save them. No one has come to Him and found that while He could bring everyone else to God there was something in his case that baffled His power, or made him an exception to the free and universal offer of His help.

But Christ's ability to save, not only meets us at the threshold as it were of our approach to God, and assures us of its sufficiency to bring us into His fellowship, it also assures us of His power to complete the process which He thus begins. He is able to save to the uttermost. This does not mean to the end of life, or up to the time of the Second Advent, though that is no doubt involved in the words. Nor does it mean that Christ's power extends so far as to reach and include those that have gone even to the farthest verge or extremity of wickedness, for that has already been implied in the words we have just considered. The idea rather is that His power is adequate to secure the perfect salvation of all who come to Him, so that nothing shall be required for its completeness which He is unable to supply. And this is the assurance that we need. To believe in the forgiveness of our sins is a great effort of faith and really involves everything. If you receive or grasp Christ as able to save you, as having a mercy that awaits to cover all your need, you have already achieved what faith finds by far its hardest exercise. You have surmounted what opens the way, and the whole way, to ultimate and final victory. But along that way there are innumerable obstacles, and bitter enemies, to be overcome. You find in yourself a host of things that not only show you how far you are as yet from being completely safe, but that thrust upon you the fear that you never

can be. They even seem to mock you for being so foolish as to have believed for a moment that such a thing was possible. And they threaten both to defy your future progress, and utterly to wreck and obliterate every trace of past attainment. The smouldering fires of half-extinguished passion flicker up on the slightest provocation and strive to resume their old ascendancy. Evil habits re-assert themselves at times, and seem as stubborn and unyielding as they ever were. Subtle currents of envy and malice betray their presence in the most humiliating ways, and a deep-seated pride and self-righteousness refuses to acknowledge the power of the Cross. Not only so, winds of doctrine carry you about, spectres of doubt start up to trouble you. A dull indifference to Divine things, a sullen reluctance to rise to higher heights of holiness or consecration to God, baffles you and holds you down as with a dead weight. Indeed, there is so much in you that is opposed to God, and that seems to resist the influence and supremacy of grace, a perfect salvation seems to you an almost impossible consummation. If you had only one besetting sin to fight with the result might not seem so doubtful, but your besetting sins are legion. If temptation approached you only by one or two avenues you might more easily exclude it, but everything seems to bring you a temptation in disguise. You can do nothing but you find something that weakens you in doing it, or instils into it some poison of self-consciousness that makes it loathsome to yourself. If you were naturally trustful and devout, so that goodness came to you easily; if your character were cast in a purer mould, and your instincts were nobler and less earthly; then you think you might make a better fight for it, and cherish a livelier hope. But with

such a temperament as yours, with such a body of sin, in which all the elements of resistance to God seem to be combined, and to express themselves with the fiercest and most relentless energy, can you hope ever to beat them under your feet? Not certainly if you are to continue in your own resources what Christ has begun. But this is just what you are not to do. If your hope of ultimate safety is to spring from anything in yourself, then it is doomed to ignominious defeat. You are just as unable to develop as you are to originate spiritual life. As the plant cannot grow unless the soil is kept about its roots, and air and moisture are supplied to it, so neither can your spiritual culture be perfected unless the influence under which it started shall carry it on to completion. In both cases the forces essential to the process must be applied from without, though they are received into the character or organism in which they work. Now the successful issue of the process of salvation depends on what Christ is able to provide and to do. If there is any limit to His power, or any defect attaching to it, there will be a corresponding risk. If in any respect He is incompetent then you may anticipate disaster. But in Him dwells all the fulness of Divine grace. Everything that we lack and require to have, we find in Him and in its infinite perfection. There is no weakness which He cannot develop into strength, no spiritual emptiness which He cannot fill, no darkness which He cannot enlighten. There are no hindrances so determined that He cannot carry you triumphantly over them, no temptations so insidious or strong but that He can make a way of escape so that you shall be able to bear them. The most impoverished characters out of which every virtue seems to have leaked, and which have become the

home of all sorts of foulness He can renovate and enrich with every good gift. The difference in the demands which the best and the most sinful make upon Him, is as nothing compared with the difference between the poverty of both, and His ability to meet it. All alike require a power which unspeakably exceeds their own, a power which is Divine, and the varying degrees in which they may require it vanish, when you remember that in every case it must be so great as to be beyond the limits of human measurement. If, then, you come to Christ and place yourself in His hands you need have no fear that you will exhaust His saving capabilities. They will reveal themselves just in proportion as your own needs constrain you to test them, and you may be sure they will not fail you. He is your abiding guarantee against loss and the risk of perishing. Between you and the pit of destruction He interposes and says : " Whoso believeth in Me shall never perish." Between you and the goal He interposes also and says : " Able to save to the uttermost." The same power that averts impending loss will ensure the final gain. " He will perfect that which concerneth you." And if you do not come to Christ, why is it you do not come ? There can be nothing in your surroundings that makes your salvation too hard for Him, for all power is His in heaven and on earth, and everything is under His sway. There is certainly nothing in Him that withholds His help from you, or impairs its fulness, for He is able to save completely everyone that cometh unto God by Him. The only conceivable barrier must be in yourself. " Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life." But if you are willing Christ is both willing and able, and into your open and unresisting heart His grace will flow and work within you both to will and to do till He

fulfils His own good pleasure of saving you unto the uttermost.

II. But we have still to consider the ground on which this saving ability of Christ rests. It rests upon the fact of His ever living to make intercession. In this respect He presents a contrast to the Levitical priesthood. It passed from one to another as death removed the successive occupants of the office. But Christ abideth for ever, and there is no interruption to the continuity of His mediation. At no point does it cease even for a moment so that those He represents can possibly have their interests imperilled. Unbroken, it prolongs itself from age to age, unchanging in its character, and unintermittent in duration. For He is made a priest not "after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life." It is not, then, on the fact of a past atonement, but on the power of a living Saviour your safety depends. No doubt the past atonement is essential to the efficacy of His priesthood, but still it is not the Cross that is the object of faith, nor any one event in the history of the incarnation, but Christ Himself who "was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification." To believe in a fact is one thing, but to trust in a living person is another. That Christ died would be of no use to us, if He were not alive now, and alive so to speak more mightily than He ever was before. Other men death removes from their intercourse with the world. It brings their direct influence and agency to an end. But death did not so affect Him. It produced no change in His activity, except to widen its range and intensify its energy. And now the whole of His priestly functions are taken up, and absorbed in this one attitude or act of intercession. How it proceeds it

is difficult for us to say, and it is not necessary that we should know. But He has left us an illustration in the prayer which He offered in the days of his flesh of how it was accomplished then, "and translating this into the modes of heavenly communion so far as we can imagine them we may perhaps form some conception of its character." Of this at least we are assured—that it embraces, and takes into account the whole sum of our necessities, and provides effectually for their supply. Moreover, as we learn from this Epistle His sympathy with us makes it instinct with reality. He has not to plead for those whom He knows afar off, and all whose chequered experience is alien and strange. He has passed through it, He has suffered and been tempted. He has waded in the deep waters, and trodden the winepress alone. His sinless and sensitive nature responded to all the infinite vibrations of sorrow and joy. And

"He still remembers in the skies  
His tears, and agonies, and cries;  
Our Fellow-Sufferer yet retains  
A fellow-feeling for our pains."

Our strongest and most earnest prayers, our confused and importunate petitions, our dumb and mute appeals, when the weight and pressure of life lie too heavily upon us, and we groan being burdened—all receive their pure, articulate, and prevailing expression in Him who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and knows the frailty of our frame.

Again, we may gather that the power of Christ's intercession springs from His atonement. | This is, so to speak, the basis on which it proceeds, the great argument which makes it conclusive. And what can make it more so? It is true our sins cry out for vengeance,



but Christ's blood cries still louder for mercy. And its cry continues sustained, penetrating through all obstructions, resistless, clear, never failing to enter into the ears of God. It speaks more mightily than that of Abel. As the blood of the first martyr refused to be covered, but uttered its voice from the ground, and brought down sure judgment on the guilty, so, and with a still greater certainty, will Christ's blood plead for us, in spite of all our sins and their attempts to overbear it, till it wins its desired result—a result that includes not only pardon but all that His sacrifice was offered to secure. And as the sacrifice was perfect, so will be its plea. As it made an end of sin so it has abolished all that withstands and imperils the attainment of its end. Does your sin trouble you? Is the memory of it grievous, and the shame intolerable? Does it fill you with fear lest it arrest God's blessing, and seal up His mercy for ever? Does the sense of unworthiness crush, and quench the hope of the good you crave, and thrust it back far out of your reach? Then remember it is not according to your worthiness the gifts of God are bestowed, nor your desert that measures and determines their amount. It is the one changeless and all-sufficient atonement of the Son of God, an atonement whose prayer nothing can resist, for it involved the surrender of all, that all might be claimed again for the cleansing, the comfort, and the everlasting joy of those who come unto God by Him. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing." And what He receives His followers share. Indeed, He receives it that it may descend in a mercy that knows no limits, and a grace that is always sufficient—sufficient because it flows from Him in whom all fulness dwells,

and that can so distribute its gifts over all the dry and thirsty places of our lives as to fill them with plenty and gladness.

Let us consider, then, brethren, the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, which hath passed through the heavens—"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever." He is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. So long as He lives no man need lack a Saviour, nor any sinner fail of redemption. Your faith may falter and your courage tremble, and the powers of darkness may get hold upon you, but nothing can impair the fulness, the complete triumphant energy of the risen life of the Son of God. In Him you ever have a Friend who will never prove faithless, a Surety who can meet all claims upon you, an Advocate with the Father, who is Jesus Christ the righteous. This foundation of God standeth sure. This provision of His is eternally complete. "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."





X.

*INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY.*

"Every man shall bear his own burden."—GAL. vi. 5.

## X.

### *INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY.*

AS these words stand in the Epistle to the Galatians they are used by St. Paul as an antidote to spiritual pride. There were some among those to whom he wrote who were disposed to be harsh towards offenders, and to regard the weakness of their brethren as a foil to their own superior strength. Such required to be reminded that if in anything they excelled their neighbours, their superior excellence was not given to become a ground of boasting, or serve as an instrument of oppression, but to be used for the benefit of those less highly favoured than themselves. For there are none so well furnished as to be beyond the necessity of requiring help, as there are none so ill-furnished as not to be capable of rendering it. And it is this giving and receiving, this mutual bearing of burdens, that is the fulfilment of the law of Christ. If however, instead of acting on this principle, a man should keep the gifts of God, lest by sharing them with others his superiority be lost, such an one deceives himself. He imagines he is something, when in reality he is nothing. For he is judging himself by comparison with his neighbour. And this is manifestly a false ground of confidence. We may be better than

others, or fancy we are so, without being very much after all. And the only right rule to go by is to judge our conduct on its own merits. For our own burden we must each of us bear.

Such seems to be the subtle and somewhat obscure train of thought that runs through the passage. But it is plain that the words of the text are capable of a much wider application. They embody one of the most rudimentary and yet one of the weightiest truths of the Gospel, the individual responsibility of each man to God. Without a distinct perception of this our religion must necessarily be vague and feeble in its practical effects, but let it be firmly grasped and consistently acted upon, and it will sink into the very foundations of our life, and shape its whole character and growth.

It is one of the most undeniable characteristics of our time that it shows an almost morbid impatience of authority. This impatience betrays itself in every direction, and in every sphere of thought and action. Europe is smitten with a political restlessness that perplexes all governments, and keeps them in a condition of chronic alarm. There is a disposition abroad to rebel against the existing order of things, and the authority that upholds it, not, in many cases, because it is unjust, but simply because it imposes restraint. And if much of the prevailing discontent is a legacy bequeathed by unequal legislation, it cannot be denied that it harbours a latent dislike to laws of any kind as such, and has generated an atmosphere out of which the wildest and most destructive forces may leap into light. We see the same tendency at work in the domain of religious truth. The landmarks that limit the range of speculation, and keep it within reverent

and sober bounds, are being torn up by violent and impatient hands. The most advanced pioneers of progress resent the presence of anything fixed, as a barrier in their way, or a temptation to the less adventurous to rest there, and be satisfied. They are resolved to have everything thrown loose, and to brand as a bigot or an obscurantist everyone who believes it possible to know anything of the unseen and spiritual world.

If this tendency were confined to a few, and failed to pass beyond its extreme exponents, it would not need to be so greatly deplored. But far from this being the case, these are simply the most pronounced and open confessors of multitudes who hesitate to go so far. For why should the very mention of a creed be enough to move many an audience into an almost visible condition of discomfort? And how is it that none are so popular as those who assail what are called accepted positions? Granting that much of our received theology is capable of a truer expression, and must adapt itself to our growing acquaintance with the teaching of Scripture; granting also that much of the antipathy which orthodoxy has aroused has been due to its rigid and uncompromising attitude, and to a false assumption of its own infallibility; we cannot suppose that the aim of the great army of the disaffected is simply to relax a too timid conservatism. They are rather inspired by the hope that modification will lead to destruction, and see in the unsettling of any religious belief, however unimportant, an excuse for suspecting the stability of all. Their object is to divest the objects of faith of their form and proportion, to surround them with a diffused and impalpable haze in which all are equally indistinguishable, and equally remote. And this, I fear, is the kind of medium

through which an increasing number in our congregations are contemplating their conceptions of spiritual things. They have no convictions, or next to none. They are swayed by every passing wave of opinion. Most of all they are ruled by the impulses of their own hearts, without anything in their religion to act as an effectual restraint.

In such an atmosphere the sense of responsibility naturally dies. In all that affects us most deeply we become a law to ourselves. The distinctions between right and wrong disappear, for right becomes what we judge to be right, and wrong what we judge to be wrong; and our judgment is under no obligation to act in any uniform way unless it be to act uniformly as we may happen to wish. Life thus resolves itself into a consistent piece of selfishness, or a series of aimless and desultory movements. And it is a fallacy to suppose that if responsibility to God be discarded responsibility to anything else will very long survive. For to whom or to what is our responsibility to be transferred? If the Divine commandments be set aside law has its only practical embodiment in the law of the land. And on what ground can it claim our obedience? If it is only the invention of our ancestors we have as good a right to be inventors as they. If the principles of justice and truth which it enshrines are principles which rest simply on their authority, and have no independent existence, we are quite at liberty to reject them in favour of other, and it may be antagonistic, principles of our own. Nor will it prevent this descent into chaos to say that there are principles of right independent of our opinions, but which do not involve the recognition of a Divine person as essential to their validity. For if these principles

did not come from God, where did they come from but from the mind of man, and what is due exclusively to the wit of man must be subject to his control. So that this sense of responsibility to God lies at the root not only of all personal religion but of all sound political life. It is impossible to maintain any lasting reverence for law and order without it, and the strength and safety of a people depend upon the extent and power of its hold upon them. He does most for his country who quickens its conscience, and elevates its conception of God into something purer, nobler and more commanding in its influence upon national character. And the worst of citizens and politicians are those who, under whatever pretence, weaken the great foundations which are the guarantees of progress just because they are the guarantees of righteousness.

To this sense of responsibility, then, there are two things that are requisite. There must be, first, a clear and authoritative definition of duty; and secondly, there must be liberty to act in accordance with it. The first of these is provided for us by revelation. It is primarily a disclosure of the character of God, and consequently of what that character requires. In unhesitating terms it lays this before us. The ambiguities of Scripture, of which so much is sometimes made, emerge mainly in connection with topics whose very character invests them with mystery. Because it deals with such profound truths as the nature of God, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the work of the Holy Ghost, it is inevitable it should say things hard to be understood, and capable of being interpreted in different ways. But even in regard to these its utterances are sufficiently clear on all points on which



it calls us to make up our minds, while on practical matters it leaves little, if any, room for doubt. It lays down firmly the great landmarks of morality, and calls upon us to shape our course accordingly. And if we often find it hard to decide for duty in preference to inclination, or to determine which of two ways, both equally lawful, may be the better for us, we are rarely at a loss as to the plain question of right or wrong, without our hesitancy arising from some inward partiality for evil itself. Our Lord says, "Whosoever *heareth* these sayings of Mine *and doeth* them," without assuming for a moment that anyone who hears them will have any hesitation as to what they direct him to do. And so undoubtedly it is with all who receive them into a good and honest heart.

The second condition of responsibility is freedom to act upon the directions which God has thus given to us. This is not provided by revelation, but is an integral part of our nature, which revelation everywhere recognises and appeals to. It is, in fact, our highest and crowning prerogative, for all our powers are entrusted to its keeping, and absolutely lie at its mercy. It places our destiny in our own hands. It imposes on each of us the decision which shall determine our future. And if its continual exercise impairs our sense of its importance it does not diminish the gravity of its results. Even now you are what you are in virtue of the way in which you have used it. Whatever circumstances may have had to do with your lot, the spirit in which you have met them has been your own. In the midst of the varied play of their influence, you have been acting up to some standard of duty or type of character which you have set before yourselves. And you are gradually adding to the accretions of

past habits, deepening the grooves in which you are moving, and prolonging their lines in a direction you have chosen. You are either fashioning yourselves according to the desires of your own hearts, or you are purifying yourselves as Christ is pure, and after the pattern which He has bequeathed to us. Whichever of the two you are doing depends entirely upon yourselves. You may be good, or you may be bad, but what determines the point is the decision of your own will. The same thing holds true of each individual action. You can never be under any obligation to do what is wrong. Though you are at liberty to do it if you choose, you are equally at liberty to do the reverse. And while nothing is commoner than for men to say, after they have done a sinful or criminal deed, that they could not help it, they never say this before the deed is done. It is the utterance of a guilty and a cowardly heart that, having transgressed, is demoralized by its own transgression, and so far, takes the part of its wrong-doing instead of unreservedly condemning it. We know when we stand at the parting of the ways that we may turn either to the right or to the left, and no sinner has ever sinned without being conscious of the fact that he might have done otherwise if only he had willed it.

These, then, being the two conditions essential to our responsibility to God, and conditions that are present in the case of each of us, let us see how the sense of it gradually develops and grows up between them.

In childhood and early youth it makes itself but feebly felt, its pressure being wisely relieved and adjusted to our strength. This is accomplished by that abridgment of our freedom which our own ignorance and incapacity necessitate. Because we cannot

provide for ourselves, and know little or nothing of the world beyond our own homes, we are placed under the care and guidance of others. As these dictate our actions and control our education, responsibility is, to a corresponding extent, taken out of our hands and imposed upon them. We wait for their decision if anything doubtful occurs, and we think it enough when that decision has been given. We do not even judge of what God would have us to do without appealing to them for advice. We feel they are better judges of His Word than ourselves, and so even here we submit our judgment to theirs. We hear the voice of God only in so far as they make it known. We take our impressions of His character and our convictions of duty from the way in which they represent Him and interpret His commands. And this is the Divine, as it is the natural, order of things. The honour that is due to Him from childhood God puts upon the parents to whose authority He enjoins obedience. He shares with them this high and holy prerogative. They stand, as it were, on the same level as Himself; and the possibility even of a discrepancy between them hardly occurs to a child, and if it does, comes upon him with a shock which may derange and dislocate his whole life. But, while the parental thus, to a large extent and for a considerable period, supersedes the Divine authority, other competitors soon come in to dispute the ground. Every year the number of things which we have to do beyond the sight and direct control of home increases and multiplies upon us. Our activity widens and passes into new fields, where it is left more and more to its own resources. Above all, as the mind enlarges and embraces a more comprehensive view of life; as it acquires the power of

judging for itself, and opportunities of carrying its judgments into effect, it finds itself at every step in presence of a more general and insisting authority. In addition to the masterful power of our own wills, which is always urging us to independence, we come into contact with other centres of opinion that do much to determine our conduct. There is the feeling prevalent in the school where we are taught, and later on the conception of duty which attaches to our profession, or the social circle in which we move, or the indefinite tribunal which we call by the name of public opinion. These all come in at successive stages, and play their part in moulding our convictions. Sometimes they are allowed to act as the supreme arbiters, and we conclude that all that receives their approval is right, and all that they condemn is wrong. We transfer, that is, our responsibility to them, and make them the virtual judges of how we are to act. Now against, or at least above, the influence of all these rivals and claimants for our respect, Christianity sets up continually a counter claim which it presses persistently upon us. It says, and says with an imperative voice: "Honour thy father and mother;" but it never says, "Honour society, or fashion, or professional or public opinion." It sanctions only one transference of our allegiance, and that is from our parents to God.\* And the time when this transference ought to take place is the most critical time in our lives. If the gradual relaxation of parental authority is unattended by a corresponding recognition of one still more sacred and supreme, which advances towards us as it recedes; if the independent exercise of judgment, and the whole movement of the outer and inner

\* The relation of Christians to the Church is a subsequent matter, and does not come into consideration here.

life passes into the whirling currents of this world's temptations, and the subtle forces that emanate from the books we read, and the company we keep, without a clear acknowledgment of that Divine will, which alone can keep each one of us in his appointed orbit, the danger is, we shall revolve as satellites round some wandering star that shall dissolve in darkness, and leave us in everlasting despair; in other words, we shall attach ourselves to some false principle or rule of life which shall cramp or corrupt our characters into likeness with itself. Hence, I say, this time is the most critical of all. It is the time when we pass from a restraint under which we have grown, and which we find in existence apart from our choice. And the question comes to be whether we shall put ourselves under guidance now of our free and deliberate will. For God's authority does not assert itself, whether we will or no. We do not see and feel it continually about us, and come under its sensible operation by the simple force of circumstances. It is only by a distinct, deliberate act, by a resolution taken and adhered to once for all, we submit to its sway, and habitually acknowledge its ascendancy. And the burden, the responsibility of this act, lies upon each of us, and cannot be delegated to any other. You must determine whether you are to have God as your Master, believing that to be right which He says is right, and that to be wrong which He pronounces to be wrong, or be at the mercy of every wind that blows. He meets you as you begin to move into the larger freedom which comes of advancing youth. He meets you as you realise that the props and supports of earlier times are passing away, and that now you are beginning to stand alone, where a single step may

precipitate you beyond recovery. As you tremble, and vacillate, and shrink, almost with terror, from the possibilities of the future, He meets you. He gives you a clear unmistakable rule by which you may order your life, and He offers to take you into His care and govern by His will and gracious power the whole development of your character and conduct.

But it is plain you will not consider, or consent to, His offer unless His authority assumes a commanding position in your thoughts, and becomes definite and even irresistible in its appeals. There are two ways in which Scripture endeavours to bring this about. The first of these is by throwing a clear light on the personality of God, as the ultimate ground of right and wrong. What we call right it says is right because He has declared it to be so. His laws are the expression of His will—of what He likes and what He dislikes. They are, in other words, a record or statement of what pleases and displeases Him. And so when we sin we are not merely breaking a law, but we are offending a person, and the difference between these two is very great. A law in itself cannot see or detect, still less can it punish us. You may break, for instance, the law of the land, or the regulations under which you work, but the law is not conscious of the fact. It is not capable of feeling offended, or cherishing a righteous resentment; and unless your offence comes to the knowledge of the authorities, and they succeed in capturing and convicting you, you may never suffer for it at all, unless in your own conscience. Hence it is there are so many crimes that are never punished, so many outrages whose perpetrators are never even discovered. The knowledge and power of the law are only equal to the knowledge and power of those who



make it, and carry it out. It is only living and operative in them. Now God knows all things, and is everywhere present. There is no limit to His intelligence or might. Wherever you are, there He is. Whatever you do, He knows and marks it. And so it is a very different, and a much more serious, thing to break one of His laws. For it is not only a trespass against them, but an offence against Him. He has seen it and felt it, as a father feels displeased when his child disobeys him, only much more keenly, because God is one with His law, and loves what it enjoins much more than any father loves what he believes to be good for his children. And having sinned we never pass from under His eye. It follows us wherever we go, and it lays upon us the burden of our wrong-doing, of each sinful act, so that not one of them can by any possibility be evaded, or made to rest on other shoulders than our own. It is a terrible thought that every one of our deeds is known, and that not one of them has passed into oblivion. There is One who knows us better than ourselves, One in whose memory every item of our history lives, and who at any moment might call us into His presence and confront us with an overwhelming disclosure of our past lives. For to Him each action stands in the full clear light in which it stood at the moment it was done. Our secret sins are in the light of His countenance.

Besides this revelation which Scripture gives us of God it asserts with solemn reiteration the great fact of retribution. God not only knows, but He means to act. He not only convicts, but He means to punish. If He did not do this His law would be useless, and cease to be obeyed. For that is practically no law which men can break with impunity. And God's law

would be a mere recommendation, which we might follow or not at our pleasure, if no reckoning, no vindication of its violated honour were to ensue. But this is certainly and swiftly coming. Our sins, which do not find us out now, and which we may fondly hope to be dead, are still alive. Every one of them includes its proportionate penalty, though sometimes in this life we may succeed in diverting it from ourselves to others. This, indeed, is what we often desire to do, and we know how common it is almost to condone an offence if the offender is clever enough to disengage himself from its results. The adroitness of his escape is allowed to extenuate the criminality of his deed. And what a vast load of unmerited pain lies in this way upon the heart of humanity ! We see suffering on every hand, and are staggered by its appalling weight and desolating effects. But it has not fallen from the clouds or sprung out of nothing. It is often the accumulation of the wrong-doing of ages, the result of innumerable acts of injustice, which have been shuffled on to the helpless residuum of the world, to be lost, it was supposed, in the dark abysses of its misery. But all this mass of wretchedness and shame, so often crushing and engulfing the weak just because of their weakness, and bruising with its pitiless pressure multitudes who are more sinned against than sinning, shall be taken up and distributed with an exact, discriminating justice to each of those who are responsible for it. The sins of men shall in due time come home to roost. The great intolerable total of the world's evil shall disintegrate and break itself up. It shall flee to its rightful owners, and attach itself irresistibly to them. And they shall be forced to recognise it, to acknowledge that sins which they denied and put out of the way, and condemned in others, are



actually theirs; that in them they behold and receive their appropriate companions, a part and parcel of themselves.

And why does Scripture thrust upon us the certainty of this law of retribution? Why does it assign to each of us, with so inflexible a hand, the burden of our own misdeeds? Is it to shut us up in a universal despair, seeing we have all sinned, and are all laden with our ill deserts? No. But it is to convince us that the shifts and evasions, with which we are apt to conceal from ourselves our responsibility to God, are worthless; that no one on earth can absolve us from the consequences of our own transgressions; that they remain with us, in spite of every effort to transfer them to others, and will find us out with unerring certainty. It brings us face to face with Him against whom our sin has ultimately struck, and confronts us with His righteousness, that a just apprehension of our guilt may compel us to look for, and to find, the mercy about which we should otherwise remain indifferent—that mercy which in Jesus Christ is sufficient for every one of us. In Him, as our great Representative, it shows us the claims of justice satisfied, our responsibilities met and fully discharged. “He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the whole world.” For while it sternly excludes the transference of our guilt to any of our fellow-men, it presents us with an atonement which it invites and commands us to accept. It warns us against laying our sin where it can never really rest, but only recoil more heavily upon ourselves, that we may lay it upon One who is mighty to save: “The Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.” And so we find the complement of the words of St. Paul in the exhortation of the Psalmist: “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain thee.”

XI.

*ASSUMPTIONS OF SINLESSNESS.*

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”—I JOHN i. 8.

## XI.

### *ASSUMPTIONS OF SINLESSNESS.*

THIS is a strong and clear statement, all the more noteworthy because it comes from one who seems to express himself elsewhere in almost directly opposite terms. It is the utterance of an Apostle who speaks out of the fulness of a long and ripe Christian experience, not simply in his own name, but as the organ or representative of the whole Church. "If we," that is, if any of us, "say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." And the words are not capable of being explained away. It will not do to assert that we may have sin in us, but that it may remain quiescent and inoperative. Sin does not show itself simply in action, still less in any one line of action, as we are apt to suppose. It impairs and weakens the fulness of our life. It lowers its quality and level of attainment, making it stop short of what it ought to be, just because it enters into all we do and makes it different from what it otherwise would be. Hence it is something whose presence may always be detected if our spiritual vision is clear, and which should always be confessed.

But, if this be so, is it of any use striving against it? Certainly. Because only by resistance will it become less powerful than it is, and be prevented from

over-running us altogether. It is not the strongest thing within us, though its presence will always be a source of weakness and embarrassment. The germs of disease may lurk in our system and necessitate care, but be so controlled by a healthy constitution they may not overcome us, as an enemy who has invaded a country may be practically dispossessed, though he may retain a stronghold here and there, and make destructive sallies into the surrounding districts. So, sin may be in us, though it may not have dominion over us; and though it have no dominion it may yet enfeeble, obstruct, and distract us. In fact, not to struggle against sin is the direct evidence of our being completely under its subjection, as there is no slavery so abject as that which tamely acquiesces in its servitude. To struggle against it, but unsuccessfully, betokens an awakened conscience, but a heart not yet strengthened by the grace of Christ. To struggle against it successfully, though with a certain measure of loss and damage—like an army which conquers though at the cost of many wounded and slain—is the case of the Christian who knows sin is always present with him, to be watched and fought against, and imposing the constant necessity of confession and prayer for forgiveness and cleansing.

What I wish to do is to show you that this truth involves certain consequences which we do not always acknowledge, that the universal presence of sin even in Christians implies defect in a great variety of directions, and that while many avowedly subscribe to the statement of my text they sometimes practically deny it without being conscious of the fact.

Let us consider its bearing:—

I. *On our conceptions of truth.* Truth is a wide word, but I use it here in St. John's sense as equivalent to the

truth of the Gospel—the truth which regulates the kingdom of God. Some of these truths, to speak of it as consisting of many component parts, underlie the faith of the Church as such, and are embraced by all its branches. It is through these we become Christians, though some of them we may state in different terms, and apprehend from different sides, as Scripture itself does. But there are others, over and above, which it is difficult and indeed impossible to harmonize, and others, again, which it is not too much to say have not yet been fully understood. That we should do our best to understand and combine them into a consistent system, or creed, is not only natural and right, but we cannot do otherwise if we are earnest students of Holy Writ. It is only by patient and conscientious study and the contributions furnished by prayerful research on the part of her members, the Church can enrich herself with the full contents of Divine revelation. But we must remember that our conclusions about many subjects, and points of doctrine, must be held provisionally, and with minds open to conviction and further light. God has not given us an infallible judgment, nor promised to guide us to an absolutely right verdict, in regard to all matters in dispute. An infallible judgment can only exist in a perfect or sinless character. You cannot fence off your understanding and exclude it from that influence of sin which affects all the other parts of our nature. For all these are so intimately related that what touches one touches all, and they co-operate in every act. Prejudice prejudices a question in accordance with its own bias, and unduly discounts the evidence that looks in another direction. Personal feeling blinds us to considerations whose force would otherwise be recognised. Attachment to a theory, or a traditional interpretation,

makes us unwilling to acknowledge frankly what tells against it, and tempts us to do violence to the natural meaning of words. As "the wish is father to the thought," so the wish that a passage should have a particular sense disposes us to find that sense in it whether it is really there or not. We know that the clearness and strength of a man's physical vision often depends on his general health. If his frame is enfeebled by old age or disease, or the bodily organs be seriously disturbed, sight suffers in consequence. The eye is not capable of the same steady, exact and penetrating gaze. It is so, also, in spiritual things. Sin has disturbed the normal, harmonious action of our nature. It has destroyed the balance of its parts, and insinuated a moral virus that subtly but deeply deflects and alters all its movements. To assume, therefore, that because a man is a Christian, sincere, devout, and earnest in his faith, he must be unquestionably right in his views of Scripture, is to assume what the Apostle here condemns. It is to suppose that he is absolutely free from all that can limit, warp, or obscure the understanding, that is, that he has no sin. But you may ask—Does not this destroy the infallibility of the Apostles themselves? They never claimed to be sinless, and St. John here expressly includes himself amongst those whose advance of such a claim would prove they were deceived. "If *we* say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." I answer to this that for special purposes the Apostles were enriched with supernatural gifts. They could work miracles, and they did so, that is, they were supplied with a power which enabled them to act in an unusual and extraordinary way, and their immunity from error was the result of such an exceptional endowment. But

we do not admit that such gifts are continued to the Church, or that any man, however saintly or enlightened, is guaranteed against all possible mistake. The necessity which existed at first for an order of what we call inspired men exists no longer, now that the Church is in possession of the completed record of Divine revelation.

But still farther you may ask—What, then, does St. John mean when he says : “Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things”? Does not this imply that very certainty in regard to every point which you are now condemning? Not, if you consider the words in the light of the whole passage in which they occur. “All things,” if you look at the verse that follows, St. John uses as equivalent to “the truth”—the distinctive truth of the Gospel. That those to whom he wrote knew this truth he asserts over and over again. It was essential to their holding the beginning of their confidence steadfast to the end, amid all the wild and unbridled speculation round about them. It was the touchstone by which they could unerringly detect the presence of Antichrist and expose the falsehood of his claims. Nor could the Church survive unless it possessed this knowledge. It would invariably fall a prey to the assaults of heresy, and disappear in a rapid process of disintegration. As a man who does not know his own mind is at the mercy of every wind of opinion, and exercises no determining influence upon events, so the Church of Christ unless it knew her Lord, and the peculiar truths which centre in His Person, would be simply and hopelessly lost amid the conflicting eddies of the world. But this is quite a different matter from affirming that every individual Christian will come to correct conclusions on all the debatable subjects that lie



within the compass of revelation. Nothing was farther from the mind of the Apostle. When he wrote this Epistle the writings of the New Testament had not yet been collected in the shape in which we possess them ; and what he was thinking of was the faith once delivered to the saints, which formed the sum and substance of the apostolic tradition. Let us, therefore, while we hold this fast and rest upon it, as the broad foundation of all our hope, ever remember our own proneness to go astray and to attach a disproportionate importance to secondary truths. Nothing has done so much to perpetuate division and misunderstanding in the Church of Christ as our holding as fixed what God has not fixed, and refusing to keep ourselves open to the light which Providence and research alike pour into the treasury of truth. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

Let us consider the bearing of my text :—

II. *In relation to guidance in practical conduct.* When we know the Gospel we wish to act in accordance with it. In other words, we desire not only to be led into right views of truth, but also into right conceptions of duty. In reality these two are one. To think truly will secure our acting rightly. If we always knew the truth completely, with that sympathetic knowledge which is a characteristic of Christian faith, we should always act rightly—at least so far as the spirit and intention of our act is concerned. I append this limitation because, in daily life, we are constantly dependent upon the representations of others, and the information we receive from them. If they submit to us erroneous or misleading statements, which we may not have the power or opportunity of testing, then in acting upon these we shall go wrong. If they wilfully and deliberately

deceive us we shall reap the bitter fruits. A Christian has no infallible protection against the ignorance or malice of others, any more than he can escape from suffering in consequence of the sins of his kinsmen or the frauds of his partner in business. Even when he has to act entirely upon his own judgment, without being indebted to anyone for the materials requisite to shape his decision, he may still quite possibly go wrong. His reading of facts may be affected by his own partialities. The perspective in which he sees them, the proportionate weight which he attaches to each, may be determined by tastes or tendencies which come into play without his being conscious of their doing so. In fact, precisely as our views of truth are coloured by our own personal idiosyncrasies and shortcomings so also are our views of duty. If we should require to be perfect or sinless men in order to be sure that our conclusions in regard to all matters connected with Revelation are certainly right, we should require to be the same kind of men to be sure that our decisions in points of duty are never wrong. In both cases we must remember that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and that wherever sin is there is liability to error, just as there is to pride, or hatred, or open transgression.

Perhaps you will say: "Nobody seriously doubts this, but do we not receive in answer to prayer what will neutralize this confessed liability, and guide us to a right decision?" I think there is often great perplexity in reference to this point. A devout Christian, having asked for Divine direction in difficulties, concludes he will receive it. He conceives himself bound to do so, otherwise he will dishonour God by his unbelief. Is he right in his argument? He is quite right, provided he understands Divine direction in the proper sense. God does

not guide us now by outward and sensible signs. There is no pillar of cloud or of fire to go before us; nor any audible voice to whisper behind us, "This is the way, walk ye in it." As a rule He does not even hedge up our path by providential arrangements, so as to shut us up to the choice of one definite course. He lays no constraint upon our actions, nor does He seek to govern them by any sort of mechanical pressure. How, then, does He answer our prayer for guidance? He gives us what the Scriptures call grace, inward enlightenment, or strength, according as the occasion may require. But you must not imagine that grace, any more than sin, is a physical quantity which may occupy a definite space within a man's nature. Grace operates throughout our whole nature, renewing the will, cleansing the affections, stimulating and purifying thought, acting as an antidote in all these directions to the power of sin. Without it sin works unqualified by any Divine control, with it sin is always under restraint. Hence no act or perception on the part of a Christian man is wholly the result of grace, but more or less of grace and more or less of sin. In short, it is the outcome or exercise of a sinful nature in which both co-exist. This being so there will always remain some liability to error even when grace is specially granted. The liability will, no doubt, decrease as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, but it will never wholly disappear.

Perhaps it may seem to you that even yet this does not take fully into account the promises of Scripture on the subject of prayer. These are, undoubtedly, "exceeding great and precious;" and they are meant to encourage us to entertain great expectations in coming to God. Christ says, "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto

you." But you know that what is stated here absolutely is elsewhere conditioned, conditioned by God's own wisdom and regard for us. Christ did not mean that God would give us, even when we asked for it, what should be to our hurt, and what therefore would be at variance with His own will, which always contemplates our highest good. Such a promise would have been discouraging and alarming in the highest degree. And even when we ask what is plainly in itself according to His will, such as guidance towards the knowledge of truth or duty, we must always remember what has been already said as to the method of God's answer. That answer will always come, and you may depend upon it, without the slightest misgiving. For He is faithful to His word, and if there be any miscarriage, the fault will never lie with Him, but in our failure to appropriate the gift, and give it free course. But the freeness of its course will depend upon us. We may interpose an obstacle that will seriously hinder His working or wholly arrest it. Conscience may have been deadened through previous inconsistency or unfaithfulness. The heart may have grown sluggish through neglect. Our affections may have spent themselves too lavishly upon earthly things, and grown dull and indifferent towards things above. Temptation may have prevailed against us, and through pride or unwatchfulness we may have admitted strange and alien guests into the sanctuary of the soul. Is it possible that in such circumstances we should be keenly sensitive to the motions of the Divine Spirit? May we not miss the intimations we might otherwise detect, or yield but a halting and imperfect response to their monitions? Will not our vision be dim and obscure, if the film that covers our eyes be pierced at all to admit the heavenly

light? If the instrument be out of tune the most gifted player can produce nothing but discord from its strings, so if our life have fallen into disorder and its inward springs have been confused, how shall the gift of God work through us without suffering thereby?

The truth is, we conceive of prayer and its results in too mechanical and unspiritual a way. We imagine we are always ready and able to receive, no matter what our petitions may include. It does not always occur to us that spiritual blessings must be spiritually discerned and spiritually used. And hence a double danger ensues. When Christians pray, and the answer does not correspond to the request, their faith in prayer is apt to be shaken. Their devotions lose their fervour. They become less frequent and persistent. They may even degenerate for a time into empty monotonous forms. They conclude that God is indifferent, or is a hard master, and that it is no use expecting anything from Him. They fail to realise that His answer can never be heard so long as the ear is stopped; that His grace can never enter so long as the heart is pre-occupied with other things, and unwilling to surrender itself wholly to Him. Or, on the other hand, they may assume that a Divine light is leading them on where they are following in reality the sparks of their own kindling. They become dogmatic and opinionative, when there is no warrant for their being so. They contract a self-confidence, and conviction that they are always right, which is apt to blind them to many pitfalls, and dig a ditch for their own feet. If they acknowledge in words the truth of my text, they fail to practise the circumspection and wariness it is meant to impose. And experience proves that nothing may be

more hurtful than to shut our eyes to what is involved in the far-reaching statement of the Apostle.

Against this deception the antidote is the truth—the truth in us. We become Christians when we receive the truth. Its touch restores us to ourselves, and scatters the mists of darkness and illusion in which we have dwelt. It shows us how vain and foolish have been our thoughts, and that we have been living in the world of imagination instead of the realms of reality. We see that our conceptions of ourselves have been false, that we have been investing the things about us with a character and importance that is equally mistaken, that God, the greatest reality of all, has been little more than a phantasm, and never been accorded His rightful place. As the mysterious cause of all this vast fabric of self-deception, our sin is unmasked. We have departed from the living God, and have loved “the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, and the lust of the flesh.” In a moment, when the truth appears, all this becomes evident. Our palace of sin lies in ruins around us, and its subtle atmosphere of intoxication is blown aside. The pure keen air of heaven strikes us, and we awake to find the lights of the firmament shining in upon our souls, and the wide endless panorama of a new heaven and a new earth stretching into infinity on every side. The truth has come, because Christ has come, before whom the darkness passes away, and all things stand out clearly as they are. Henceforth you live among realities, in so far as you live with Him and He lives in you. No brooding haze abides His presence. No glamour dazzles the eyes when He is at hand. No siren’s song bewitches, or undoes the bonds of resolution when His voice is heard. When He is near, the spiritual atmosphere is

too pure to admit of our deceiving ourselves. Sin we see in its true colours ; and, above all, we see it in its most repulsive features in our own hearts. As its inner workings reveal themselves, and it lies bare in all its nakedness, our pride and self-complacency are for ever dead. We cannot any longer dress ourselves up in the borrowed raiment of an imaginary righteousness, or suppose that our fancied excellence is anything else than it truly is. And if at times we are tempted to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, to assume a knowledge or a wisdom that is not truly ours, then one upward look, one moment's gaze upon Christ our Lord, will recall us to ourselves, and we shall hear, like the solemn tolling of a passing-bell, these words of the Apostle, ringing the knell upon all the loftiness of our imaginations : " If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ;" and we shall confess, " I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear : but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."



XII.

*WHO IS A MURDERER ?*



"Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer."—I JOHN iii. 15.

## XII.

### *WHO IS A MURDERER?*

NOTHING reveals the gulf that separates ancient from modern history more clearly than their respective estimates of human life. If, for instance, you read an account of how Rome built up and consolidated her conquests, you will shudder at the terrible track of blood that marked her advance. Her wars were butcheries, sometimes relieved by gleams of humanity, but often desolating whole countries, till little or nothing was left to kill or to destroy. She made a solitude and called it peace. The world was literally filled with violence—a violence that owned no law; and men lived for ages in a chronic state of insecurity, except during rare and transient intervals. Nor was this so much to be wondered at. For what was there to surround or invest man as such with reverence? What was he? Whence had he come? Whither was he going? To these questions antiquity had nothing definite to answer. St. Paul, it is true, quotes a heathen poet as testifying to the Divine origin of humanity: "For we are all His offspring." And it would not be difficult to collect parallel passages from the same source. But the flights and speculations of poetry are not to be mistaken for the convictions that mould men's

thoughts, and govern their conduct. And there was one thing that stood fatally in the way of any lofty conception of humanity possessing the mind of the ancient world. That was the institution of slavery. A slave had no rights, or next to none, and was regarded as belonging to an inferior order, or grade of being. The freeman or citizen who had rights, possessed them not because he was a man, but because he was a member of a stronger or more favoured class who had been able to compel respect for their prerogatives. Life, in short, was safe only to those who could make it dangerous to assail it.

Nor was there any restraint laid upon the prevailing violence by the fear of a righteous judgment to come. For in the absence of a Divine revelation righteousness was simply what appeared to men to be right ; or, in other words, the public opinion of the time, which, as we have seen, paid little or no respect to life as such. Besides, a future judgment was only to be found in the regions of fable or mythology, and never entered vitally into the popular creed.

“Talk of our souls, and realms beyond the grave,  
The very boys will laugh and say you rave.”

Here modern history has acknowledged a new stream of influence, which has come to us through Christianity, as that again received it from an older source. The opening pages of the Old Testament teach us that man was made in the image of God, and on this ground inculcate respect for human life under the most terrible of all possible penalties : “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” The New Testament enforces the same lesson, enhancing it still farther by the additional light which a clearer revelation

has thrown upon man and his destiny. He is not only the bearer of the Divine likeness, but the object of the Divine love—a love which has given and spent itself wholly for him. The fact that Christ has loved us, and tasted death for every man, makes every man sacred. It invests him with a moral worth and dignity which can only be measured by the greatness of that sacrifice. And in harmony with this we are told of a destiny awaiting us which is to stand in astonishing contrast to the present, as our true and renovated nature is infinitely nobler than its mean and perishing surroundings. After death comes the judgment, when everyone shall stand before the Son of Man to receive the things done in his body according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

It is impossible the world should receive such teaching as this without being impressed by the awful sanctity of human life. It makes us hold our breath as we reflect on the issues that hang upon it, and the strange unfathomable mysteries of the nature we wear. In presence of these the taking of our brother's life shocks us as a profane, high-handed, inhuman crime: so inhuman that the man who commits it must first have ceased to be a man, and have entered a region of wickedness where we fail to follow him—even in thought. To mutilate the image of God, to cut some poor soul short of its allotted term for penitence, to pour out the deadly dregs of hate on one for whom Christ has poured out His soul upon the Cross—is not only a crime against society, an unspeakable wrong against the victim slain, but a sin against God whose prerogatives have been usurped and His authority defied.

But what really is this of which we stand in such natural and wholesome awe? What makes the sin so

sinful? Not merely the taking of a life. For we can read of thousands being slain in battle, and however great our pity or repulsion it is repulsion of a wholly different sort. We recognise the fact that there are interests superior even to life, and that this must sometimes be sacrificed to avert more ruinous results. It is the motive or intention with which the deed is done, the deliberate and savage hate which has leaped beyond the barriers of restraint, and refused to be satisfied except with blood, that invests it with such an atmosphere of horror. And so teaches the Apostle, probing the evil to its root, and laying bare the dark malignant region out of which it springs: "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer." But is not this to confound feeling with action in a somewhat dangerous and hasty way? Is it not one of those extreme statements which, by their very exaggeration, recoil upon themselves, and lose their force? If he who hates is to be considered a murderer, does it not follow that he who murders is to be considered no more than a hater? Is it not unjust to make any difference between them? And farther, if to hate and to kill are held to be equivalents, will this not remove the last and most powerful restraint upon passion? If he who hates has already incurred the guilt of murder, may he not argue that the overt act can make him no worse than he has already become, and can therefore expose him to no additional risk—so far, that is, as God's judgment on the matter is concerned? But this is not to be inferred from the words of my text. Christianity does not say that a wicked thought is in all respects equal to a wicked deed. If it did so, it would set itself at variance with the instincts of our own nature, and utterly confuse our moral consciousness. But what it

does say is, that the guilt is identical in kind though it differs in degree; that in moral character they are essentially the same, though they differ in the amount or depth of their immorality.

The great fault of the heathen world was to look too much or even exclusively at the act, and too little at the motive. The Pharisees in the time of Christ, and the Jews generally, had fallen into the same snare. They were satisfied with external obedience to the law, even while they grossly violated its spirit. In both cases man's inner nature was withdrawn from moral control. Wrong was not wrong until it entered into the outer area of life, and if it held back from this it was free to indulge itself at pleasure. Christ's teaching was a protest against this fallacy. It was a fallacy that made moral regeneration impossible. For how could the fruit be good if the tree remained corrupt, or the waters clean if they flowed from a polluted source? So He preached at once the necessity of repentance, or a change of heart. He declared that a lustful look was adultery in the heart, that if a man hated his brother he was in danger of the judgment, and that to refuse to forgive was to shut oneself out from the forgiveness of God. He extended the jurisdiction of the Divine law to the hidden, more impenetrable region of motive and desire. There the evil fruit was to be nipped in the bud. There the streams were to be cleansed by purifying the fountain. And following the steps of his Master, repeating almost His very words, St. John declares that, as the foundation of all excellence and likeness to God is love, so the most grievous and dangerous of all sins is hatred. "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer."

We need, then, to look below the surface and test

ourselves by what we find there. "The world is still deceived with ornament." Appearances are still allowed to betray into a false security. When you look at the smiling slopes of Vesuvius, at the hamlets nestling in its hollows, the matchless beauty of the bay with all her loveliness sleeping at its feet, you can scarcely conceive of the wild torrent of destruction that poured from its sides two thousand years ago. But the occasional rumble, the dense columns of ascending smoke, her tremour of the quaking earth, remind you that the mighty monster is awake, and may again let loose the vials of his wrath. So we are misled by the smooth and superficial gilding of our modern civilization. Education has spread, refinement is more general, a fashionable craze for culture is abroad, order is steadily and sternly maintained—not so much from the love of order, as because the complex and delicate machinery of life could not otherwise be kept at work. Person and property were never so safe at any period in the world's history, and an active and devoted philanthropy has stretched its network of reforming agencies over the length and breadth of the land. Surely, we think, the tiger in human nature has been chained at last, the demon of lust and anarchy has been exorcised. But we are not allowed to remain long under the fond impression. Some outbreak of communism, some sudden delirium of lawlessness, some startling and appalling crime, shows the diseases of the world have not been cured, nor the forces of evil destroyed. The germs that breed them, the passions that explode into all sorts of excess, are still in our midst. And the old things shall not pass away and all things become new till the heart of the world is changed.

It is the same also with ourselves. We are strongly

tempted to take too much for granted, to conclude there are certain things of which we are quite incapable. We are blinded by the fact that our position protects us from certain temptations, or so weakens their force, they cannot pierce the armour of our respectability. Nay, self-interest may so range us on the side of right, as to put us practically beyond their reach. The man who has plenty has little or no temptation to theft. And the man who has property, cannot understand how others should unite to tamper with its sacred prerogatives. That seems to him a monstrous and intolerable sin. But this does not prove that were his circumstances changed, his way of looking at things might not change also, that what was no temptation before would not be a temptation then. And do we not know that plenty itself—or, for that matter, affluence even—does not exclude fraud and unfairness in the race for riches. Is there no thieving on the Stock Exchange, no swindling in the markets? Do people who live in the West End, and drive in their carriages, always respect the rights of property? Are there not amongst them greater and more heartless rogues than the hunger-bitten wretches who can scarcely find a meal in Whitechapel, or the mobs that riot in Trafalgar Square? “Woe unto you, hypocrites! that make clean the outside of the cup and platter, but within are full of extortion and wickedness.” “Verily I say unto you, the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.”

But if we may escape temptations from which our position secures immunity, we may fall into others to which perhaps it especially exposes us. If it is often difficult for us to do wrong, just because so many fences close us in, and a hundred eyes would be



witnesses of our shame, it is always easy to cherish the sinful feeling or desire. We may even compensate for our exclusion from the field of open transgression by giving the reins to a loose and wandering, an unhallowed and impure, imagination. And how many there are who would shrink with terror from the overt act, who rarely suspect they conceal the seeds and roots of it within themselves! Do you never envy him who is more prosperous than yourself, and grudge him the good he enjoys? Do you never look with an evil eye on some fortunate rival who is winning the prizes you most earnestly covet? Are there none of you who nurse a smouldering resentment for some real or imaginary wrong? Are you sure there is no one whom you inwardly and sincerely hate, of whom you say to yourself, "I should be truly glad if he were never to cross my path, or darken it again with his presence"? And when he does, how do you regard him? Do you meet him with a smiling face and plausible address? "A man may smile, and smile, and be a villain." And "whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer." This is the feeling full-blown and acted out. This is God's verdict upon it, the judgment of Him to whom we stand or fall, and who appraises and apportions guilt, not according to the outward appearance, but according to the hidden man of the heart.

Now what does all this show? What is the conclusion to which it points? *First*: That crime is not to be removed by external remedies alone. Not that these are to be despised or disparaged. For sometimes they must be applied before anything else can have a chance of success. And it is absurd to suppose that because they cannot do everything they can therefore

do nothing, and may wisely or warrantably be left untried. Whatever helps to improve men's social environment and lift them towards a greater measure of self-respect, weakens the power of temptation, and proportionately lessens the likelihood of transgression. So long as the poor are driven into slums, where the decencies of life are next to impossible; so long as the only places of entertainment are the gin palace and the music hall, where all that is evil is fed and encouraged; so long as a low and impure literature holds the field, and sows the seeds of moral disorder amongst them, it is only to be expected that offences will come, and anything that counteracts and curtails these sources of mischief is surely a step in the right direction, and to be strenuously urged. Yet it is only a step. These are the approaches and outworks of the citadel: but while the heart of man remains unchanged, the stronghold is still in possession of the enemy, and his forces may sally forth and overrun the ground that has been so hardly gained. While, therefore, we avoid the mistake of underrating the importance of social and sanitary reforms, we must be equally on our guard against supposing they can accomplish everything. The house may be swept and garnished, and the evil spirit apparently expelled; but if another and a better occupant do not take his place, and keep him out, he will return, as the parable tells us, and the last state will be worse than the first.

But, *secondly*, if something more drastic than external remedies are needful what is to be done? Will the spread of education and enlightenment so refine the taste, it will reject the grosser forms of indulgence? Is ignorance the great mother of evil, so that if men only knew how foolish and ruinous it is they would leave it in disdain? And shall we comfort ourselves by the

reflection that the schoolmaster is abroad? Alas! experience proves that some of the most brilliant periods of history have been the most corrupt, and that the seat of the disease lies too deep to be reached by such a cure. We know ourselves also that the conviction of an action's sinfulness is not enough to prevent us from doing it, as the conviction of its righteousness will not suffice to secure its being done. Passion is too strong to be curbed by prudential considerations, and too blind and furious to listen to the voice of reason. We may ransack our repertory of devices as we will, and exhaust the whole pharmacopœia of moral expedients; but we shall not find anything that will stay the plague of the human heart. The truth is, that all our earthborn experiments carry with them the defect attaching to their source. They are short-sighted, or one-sided, and where they see most clearly and impartially they only confess their impotence, and give up the problem in despair. But while Christianity has so unerringly detected the spring of all human misery, and exposed it in its undisguised malignity, it has also revealed an effectual cure. It brings with it a salvation which is no mere experiment or assault upon the outworks of our foe, but which goes straight to the root of the matter, and speaks with the voice of certainty. It embraces our whole nature—spirit, soul, and body—and advances from this centre to claim and occupy every province of life. To a humanity despairing of its own recovery, casting about everywhere for help and finding none, till it folds its hands in blank despair, or rushes recklessly into the pit, Christ brings good tidings of great joy. He has a life to give that is pure and undefiled, that draws its strength and fulness from Himself. It can quicken the most dead, lift up the

most utterly fallen, bind up the most broken. There is no virulence of evil with which it cannot cope, no ruin of the soul which it cannot repair. Pregnant with a resistless, because a celestial, power it carries along with it the confident assurance and guarantee of victory. And whenever the world learns, not only that a legion of devils has entered into it, and driven it from paradise into a waste and desolate land, where it stumbles among the tombs, and scents the continual odour of death, but learns also that Christ has landed on its shore to bless and to redeem, and draws men to Him, though it be with fits of repulsion and fear, it will know the power of that mighty but gentle voice, and sit at His feet, clothed and in its right mind.

And to apply this to ourselves. If you do not feel that you need a Divine power brought to bear upon your heart, have you ever really examined the true moral character of your daily life? Have you considered what the unforgiving and uncharitable temper, the selfish and impure desire, really mean—that they are straws which show how the wind blows, symptoms of a fatal disorder, which is not to be banished by passing moods of penitence, or the postures of worship? If you look out upon the world you will see there these very sins writ large. You will find that the wanton excesses that fill us with shame, the deeds that crowd our police reports and our prison cells, are the legitimate offspring of the evil things which you are inclined to pass over so carelessly in yourself. Murder, the most heinous of them all, is but hatred full grown and stalking abroad to work its fell and ruthless will. Yes, if we calmly and dispassionately “make an interior survey of our good selves” we shall find that we need something more searching and renovating than we are

often inclined to suppose. If you heal your wound slightly it will soon break out again, or the virus will betray itself at some other point. If you try to do it thoroughly you will learn equally soon, perhaps sooner, how completely it baffles all your resources. I pray and beseech you to take heed, not to be satisfied with the form of godliness without the power, not to take it too lightly for granted that all is well. Look beneath the surface, beneath the decencies and proprieties that so often conceal our true condition from ourselves. Be assured there is only one thing that can save a man, and that is not church-going, nor sacraments, nor the armour of respectability on the right hand and on the left : it is that grace of Christ which, where sin has abounded, has much more abounded, which forgives us when we come to Him, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness, shedding abroad within us that love which is the fulfilling of the law. But except a man be thus quickened by contact with Him, and born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And no acquaintance with the creed of Christianity ; no devoutness in worship, or devotion to the outward interests of the Church ; no light of knowledge, or grace of culture, or height of attainment, will atone for the want of it. Nay, perhaps when all these are present, and in their most attractive and fascinating form, there may be the lurking germs of malice and uncharitableness that only wait for some passing breath of temptation to fan them into a flame that shall utterly consume the thin gauze and wrappings of goodness that have overlaid them for a time.

“ Every heart when sifted well,  
Is a clot of warmer dust  
Mix'd with cunning sparks of hell.”

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked—who can know it?” “I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments, and do them.”



XIII.

*THE FORM OF A SERVANT.*



"He took upon Him the form of a servant,"—PHIL. ii. 7.

### XIII.

#### *THE FORM OF A SERVANT.*

**I**N the second half of the Book of Isaiah there is frequent mention of the Servant of the Lord. We find that under this title is described that mysterious Person, dimly discerned in Old Testament prophecy, who was to lead the people of God to their highest stage of bliss. He who was to be mightier than all prophets, priests, and kings, in whom all their qualifications were to be combined, and carried to a pitch of excellence exceeding anything hitherto seen or known, He receives as His most fit and appropriate designation, the "Servant of the Lord." This was to constitute His chief glory, His greatest praise, that He should show the world what a true Servant of God ought to be. For all men who had gone before Him, however good or great, had failed to do this. One after another they had been tried and found wanting, and their writings are full of their confessions of failure and sin. But He who was to come in the fulness of time was to carry on the work of God to its final consummation. Through Him at last it was to be completely and perfectly done. And the New Testament tells us how it was accomplished. Instead of seizing the high places of the world, or wielding "the force of temporal power," He

made Himself of no reputation. He toiled in lowliness, and suffered in shame. The victory of the world's redemption, and all those inestimable benefits which have checked the violent progress of sin, and leavened human lives with the pure and penetrating power of goodness, were won by Him who humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross. In no other way, so far as we can see, could He possibly have helped us. It behoved Him to come down that He might raise us up, to place Himself at the disposal of the lowest and the worst, that no one might be left unreached by the salvation and love of God. And it is because He did this He has been highly exalted, and received a name that is above every name, and an honour which the whole universe shall yet acknowledge to be supreme. Thus also He has decided beyond dispute what is to be held in highest esteem and counted most glorious. He has shown us what will eventually be recognised, if it is not now, as the noblest life for man. It is the life of service. The form of a servant has been dignified above every other, and to follow Him is to take it, and wear it faithfully and thankfully even to the end. Thus only shall we taste the deep joy of Divine fellowship, and share in the exaltation which He has received. "If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be: if any man serve Me, him will My Father honour."

Naturally we all like to be masters. If we excel our neighbours in strength, riches, or learning, it seems only reasonable we should enjoy and use our superiority. And we are certainly intended to do so. But everything depends upon the way in which we use it. We may use it simply to please ourselves, or we may try

to make it helpful and serviceable to others. And there is a great difference between these two—so great a difference that it often requires a hard struggle to make and to continue making the proper choice. It is a struggle, moreover, which ought to begin at the earliest possible moment in our lives if it is to have the best chance of a complete victory. Few stronger temptations come upon a youth than the temptation to tyrannize over those weaker than himself. It seems to him a matter of course that he should insist on their doing exactly as he likes. In this way his seniors acted towards him, and it would strike him as quite unfair if he should be denied his turn of authority. Not only so, he would consider it positively foolish if he refused to take it. He would fear that his consideration might be mistaken for softness, or still worse for timidity and cowardice. And this is the greatest reproach he could be called upon to endure. The very idea of it will oftentimes urge him into gratuitous violence and self-assertion. And yet there is no one truly generous and brave who will suffer long from such a suspicion. He will very soon be seen to be what he is, and the real motive of his actions will be understood. And you may depend upon it there is no one whose superiority will be so readily acknowledged, as the superiority of him who uses it kindly and unselfishly in the service of others. This is the way to inspire affection, and to win the heart—to be above your companions, and yet never show it except in trying to lift them up, to be wiser, and yet make it your joy to share with them your riper experience, to be stronger, and yet treat them as though they were as strong as yourself, with this only difference that you make your strength the protection of their weakness.

It was in this way Jesus kindled such wonderful devotion, and does so still. As He went about with His disciples He was infinitely greater than they, and they knew it. They saw Him still the waves that tossed about their little boat and threatened to swamp them in the Galilean lake. They saw Him cast out devils that no man could tame, and they looked on in amazement while the dead were raised. Peter and all of them together confessed He was the Son of God. Yet they were not afraid of Him. If for a moment they were awestruck He put them again at their ease, and they gathered round Him, and talked to Him as though He had been one of themselves. And how was it so? Because though He was a King, he took upon Him the form of a servant, and they knew that His great and kingly power would only be used to help and to bless them. It was this that, when they thought of it afterwards, made them love Him so much. They liked to muse on the days they had spent at His side, and to recall the kind and generous things He had done. One of these, especially beautiful, is told us by St. John, and when he wrote about it in his old age his words betray his overwhelming wonder and emotion. A dispute had arisen, when they were all but children in the school of Christ, as to who should be considered the greatest. And the great Master who had come from God, and was then about to return to the glory of the Father, with His heart full of His mysterious future, girded Himself with a towel, and washed their feet before they sat down to supper. "He took upon Him the form of a servant."

But this lesson, which the birth and ministry of Jesus so strikingly suggests, is to be practised not only at the beginning, but all through the course of our life. It is

not wholly true that we become more our own masters as time goes on. In some respects we do. We act more upon our own judgment, and the restraints we submit to are not so immediate or direct. But it would be more correct to say that we only exchange one set of masters for another. For every year adds to the burden of our responsibilities; and the more faithfully a man discharges his duty the less he can be said to have his own way. His path is often hedged up and sometimes sharply deflected by obstacles which no one can see but himself. So it was with Christ. It may seem to us at first that His long seclusion among the hills of Galilee, with its unbroken submission to the duties of His home, was almost an imprisonment compared with the freer movements of His after years. But what pain and anxiety these brought in their train! What untold self-repression, and straitness of spirit! He had to endure the contradiction of sinners against Himself, to keep back words of wisdom which He longed to utter, to check the outgoing of His beneficent power because those whom He wished to heal rejected and despised Him. He had to save and redeem man with a harder service than any He had rendered during His thirty years in Nazareth.

It is true that our life partly assumes the form of service as a matter of social necessity, and that we cannot help ourselves. We work under superiors to earn our living, and if we are masters to some we are servants to others. In the last resort the claims of the community must always take precedence of each individual. And so far the form of a servant is imposed upon us by the very conditions under which we live. But this is only to a limited extent, and leaves us still with abundance of room for developing a deep

and varied selfishness. Moreover, it is one thing to submit to the requirements of social order, which are essential guarantees of safety and successful toil, and another thing to take, as Christ did, the form of a servant freely, and invest our whole life in this humble habit. For this He did. It was all service, and completely such. The form He wore so covered His royal and heavenly dignity, that many as they look upon Him still fail to see anything under the disguise. The robe itself is so beautiful because of the perfect grace of Him who wore it, they stop there and are satisfied.

I. In order, then, that we may be followers of Christ, and that our life and character should be like His, I notice, first, that we must freely surrender our wills to God. We hear much of the enthusiasm of humanity, and how reasonable and beneficent a religion is the service of man. But there is a previous question, What is man, and how can he best be served? None has ever conferred more numerous or lasting blessings on the world than Jesus Christ. It is wilful ignorance and hatred that refuses to acknowledge so evident a fact. And why do the preachers of positivism set Him so summarily aside and ignore the methods of His teaching? Because they know that the secret of all Christ's enthusiasm for men is found in His relationship to God. And they feel that to acknowledge Him would commit them to the acknowledgment of a great deal more, which they have resolved at all hazards to renounce. And this feeling is right: for if you read the Gospels there are two convictions that infallibly impose themselves upon you. The first of these is that none has ever loved man so wisely and faithfully as Christ. He never was weary of well-doing. Ingratitude did not repel Him, nor cold and pitiless



scorn freeze the fountains of His pity. Ignorance, though wedded with sin, never moved Him to disdain. Some of His profoundest words were spoken to a wayward and wanton woman at a Samaritan well. The most loathsome disease did not turn Him away. A whole cityful of sick folk was laid at His feet and He healed them every one. His bitterest foes who had hounded on the multitude against Him, and driven the wavering Pilate to obey their will, He prayed for on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Well we may say, "Behold how He loved!" But another conviction keeps this company and provides its explanation. How was it Jesus loved, and loved so loyally to the end? Was it because He could read, as none other could, the dignity of human nature even in its ruins, and out of pure pitifulness for its lost estate? No doubt it was so. But how was this sustained and kept burning with the fire of a sacred passion in His heart? How did it never smoulder or flicker for a moment, even when His own Galilee rejected Him, and Jerusalem sent Him to be crucified. It was because He was doing the will of His Father who sent Him, a will that He knew could never be defeated, and would rise triumphant from its apparent wreck. And accordingly you find that in all the great crises of the conflict it was from this He drew His strength and consolation. As He entered on the fight, it was the affirmation of His Sonship that filled Him with power, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." When Capernaum and Chorazin had cast Him out, His weary heart found rest in the assurance that such was His Father's will, who had hidden from the wise and prudent what He had revealed to babes. Before



He descended into the dark valley of His passion it was the same heavenly voice He had heard on Jordan, that rejoiced His soul. In the bitter throes of the great agony the thought that tranquillized and reconciled Him to His sufferings, was knowing that His cup was the cup which His Father had given Him to drink. And so it must be with all who would truly wear the form of a servant. It is one thing to write about the enthusiasm of humanity in comfortable studies, and another thing to cope with the vulgar sins and wretchedness of men. How much of human dignity do we see in the miserable dregs of our overgrown cities, or in the cold calculating selfishness of their culture and wealth! Is it not so that actual contact with evil and degraded men, breeds in the purest and most susceptible hearts a feeling akin to despair at the desperate malignity and power of sin. The vauntings of positivism would have a better justification if it established a City Mission, or sent its teachers into the wilds of Africa. But there is, indeed, no devotion to men, and to the service of our fellows, which will survive the sore disappointments and rebuffs of a callous and contemptuous world, unless it be fed by devotion to God, and nourished by constant fellowship with Him. Then, when you feel it is His will you are striving to do, and for His sake you have given yourself to the task, you have a motive independent of passing failure or success, for you know that His Kingdom will surely come. And you will refresh and renew your strength by draughts from a purer fountain than is found on earth.

II. Then, secondly, we must wear the form of a servant always and everywhere. Christ never laid it aside from the moment He assumed it at Bethlehem till He

had said "It is finished." His life He speaks of as a work, because, though spent at different places and in doing a variety of duties, it was pervaded by one purpose from beginning to end ; He never ceased to be a servant. And the highest praise given to Israel's greatest King was, that he served his generation by the will of God. So it ought to be with us. Worship is the highest act of service. Yet to be genuine it must be the crown and expression of a life of obedience. But how often we renounce and refuse the form of a servant ! We like to assume it in some things, and to discard it in others. We define our spheres of duty and we wear it there, but elsewhere we fain would masquerade in another dress. And how narrow and circumscribed are even our chosen spheres ! How seldom they embrace the complete area of life and all its diverse activities ! We consider so much time as given to Christ, and so much labour as engaged in for Him, but we think ourselves at liberty to make up for the sacrifice by doing what we choose with the rest. And even in what we undertake or surrender ostensibly for Him, do we never need to be reminded that we should wear the form of a servant ? We complain if our labour is heavier than that of others, if it is more obscure or less to our taste. We like to settle its amount, to fix its duration, to decide precisely how much it will involve. The natural pride and indolence of our hearts is always breaking out, and under the form of a servant we often carry a lordly and imperious will. But they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts. It is no longer ours to question or dispute, to murmur or rebel. If we have truly given ourselves to Him, we shall take up the cross and deny ourselves daily. And we shall find in

any hour and in every pursuit a means of acting in accordance with our condition. Our whole life will resolve itself into a grateful sacrifice, in which no service will be too lowly if it helps to ease a burden, or make the wheels of toil run more smoothly.

The form of a servant! Is this, indeed, the habit you wear—the dress or uniform by which the world can distinguish you? Men say that Christianity is growing old, that somehow it has lost the secret of its power. Once the common people heard it gladly, and publicans and sinners drank in its message with delight. But now it has found its home among the rich, and become the creed of the respectable. It has changed its ways and donned a different garb. It speaks in altered tones, and has taken on the impress of its new condition. And there is truth in this. The religion of Christ has been watered down till we can scarcely recognise it. It is a refining influence, an appropriate finish to a conventional education. Or, it is lost in elaborate services and devotional prettinesses. And Christmas\* will do us good if it brings us seriously face to face with the cardinal fact of the humiliation of Christ, and His obedience perfected in tears and blood, if, while it points to the cradle it shows us there the first step to the bitter cross, and reminds us that to be a Christian is to engage in the same unswerving and noble life of self-sacrifice to God—to take upon us the form of a servant.

III. Thirdly, the strength of service lies in our sonship. We saw that the spring of Christ's enthusiasm lay in His relation to God. The form of a servant covered the dignity of the Son, and this gave its value to Christ's obedience and marked it as a sacrifice. The

\* Preached on Christmas Day.

servant who is nothing more than a servant is only acting, when he serves, in keeping with his character. But the peculiarity about Christ was that He was infinitely more. And in becoming such He entered a condition which was not originally His. He left the glory which He had before the foundation of the world, and exchanged it for a state of poverty and trial. Yet in so doing He did not cease to be the Son, the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. So also our service must rest on filial fellowship with God. If it be not sustained and upheld by this it is rendered in our own strength, and is simply the assertion of our self-will. Moreover it will lack what alone can make it truly acceptable to God. For it will lack freedom, and be burdened with the spirit of bondage, or inspired by a pride that will strip it of the character of service and change it into the form of a favour. Nor, on the other hand, will it be profitable to men, for though it may relieve their surface wants, and dry their tears for a time, it will not staunch their deepest wounds nor carry with it the power of an endless life. And this is what Christ has brought to our succour. He came with a blessing from the bosom of the Father. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. He applied to the sores of our stricken lot the balm of a medicine potent with the virtues of the love of God. All that heaven contained of strength to redeem, and grace to restore, He opened for the comfort and salvation of men. And if we wish to follow in His footsteps, and carry with us the same potent and effectual cure, we must bring it from the same celestial source. We must know our way to the presence of the Father, and receive from Him the glow of compassion and the heart of charity. When we kindle our torch at that high altar's

fire, we shall then take the true light into the dark and sombre places of the earth. When we drink of the river that issues from the throne, the waters of the fountain shall flow through the empty channels of our life and make the wastes of the world smile. Here and there, in spite of the deadly breath that poisons the air, and though their roots be in a dry ground, shall grow up the fragrant flowers of the Divine husbandman that shall be gathered by-and-by into the paradise of God.

So, then, you will observe that sonship must always lie at the basis of service. You do not climb your way by the ladder of obedience to the elevation of the Father's house. You do not receive as the reward of a long discharge of duty the prize of His gracious recognition. But first the spirit of adoption, then the liberty and joy of service. First God's gift to you, then the grateful requital of a work of faith and labour of love. And here is the gift. "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given." In Him is might to save and the power to invest with the honours of sonship. To as many as receive Him to them gives He the right to become children of God. He liberates from the slavery of sin, and from that great indefinite dread that floats like a dark cloud on the horizon of life. He enlarges the heart, so that you run in the way of His commandments. And as you put on Christ you find that while you have taken the form of a servant, you have also received the spirit of a son. "I am Thy servant, for Thou hast loosed my bonds." "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift."

XIV.

*THE UNRIGHTEOUS MAMMON.*

“And I say unto you, Make to yourself friends [by means] of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.”—ST. LUKE xvi. 9.

#### XIV.

##### *THE UNRIGHTEOUS MAMMON.*

THE parable, to which this is appended, as containing its moral, or practical lesson, is difficult, but very suggestive. Its purpose is to teach us the right use of whatever means God may have placed at our disposal. So far it is perfectly clear. But the supposed incident by which it illustrates and enforces its lesson has been felt to be perplexing and even repugnant. Is the conduct of the unjust steward to furnish a parallel for the disciples of Christ? Are they to use the same means for obtaining a future benefit in the world to come which he so cleverly but unscrupulously employed to obtain a temporal advantage? Certainly not. It is the end which the unjust steward had in view which the parable commends, and not the particular device by which he secured it. His aim was to use his position so as to enlist the good will and favour of those who might befriend him when reduced to penury. The fraud by which he attained his end was simply consistent with his own character, and such, as in the circumstances, might have been expected. Indeed, the whole of the difficulties which run through the parable spring from the fact that it describes the procedure of an unjust, and not of a conscientious and faithful, servant. And why



did our Lord select such an one as the medium or vehicle of His instruction? Just because it was essential in order to give it the requisite emphasis and point. This depended upon the steward having to contemplate a speedy retirement from his trust, and that under conditions that made it imperative to provide for a precarious and penniless future. It is not likely that a faithful servant would have found himself in so painful a dilemma. Yet it was exactly such a situation that had to be described to carry home the exhortation contained in my text.

The great and radical fallacy that underlies the abuse of wealth is the belief that our money or our property is absolutely our own. If it is honestly come by it is our own, in so far that no one else has any right to deprive us of it. But it is not our own to do with just as we like; for we are stewards or trustees, and not irresponsible proprietors. We hold whatever we possess for certain purposes, and though we are invested with large discretionary powers, we are not at liberty to violate the objects which these were intended to fulfil. The first end of all labour, and of the wages which labour earns, is to provide for our maintenance. "In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy bread." The life which God has given to us He means us to support by our own effort, and He even teaches us that we forfeit our right to enjoy it if we refuse so to provide for it. "If any will not work, neither should he eat." But why has God given us our life, and why is it of any importance that it should be preserved at all? It has been given to us that we may use it in His service, which is the only way in which it can reach its highest development, and to maintain it for any other purpose is surely to abuse it, and to abuse the means which

minister to its maintenance. The man who works simply to keep the bodily machine in motion, or to gratify some personal end, without remembering he has a purpose to fulfil outside of himself and the circle of his own interests, is clearly forgetful of the fact that he holds life and all that belongs to it only in trust. If you eat your bread to-day just that you may be able to earn it to-morrow, and to accumulate a surplus as you go along, you are acting precisely as though you were responsible to none besides yourself. You are assuming that you are absolute master of your time and energies, and under no obligation to consider any other will than your own. God may use you, no doubt, for the furtherance of His purposes, just as in some mysterious way all His creatures are made subordinate to the development of His Kingdom; but this will be without any intelligent co-operation on your part. You will fail to enter into living connection with it, and to share in its onward movement and triumphs.

But it is in reference to what remains after the satisfaction of our legitimate wants that our recognition of the truth of our stewardship is most easily tested. So far our expenditure is determined for us, and the principle that governs our actions works under restraint. But when we pass beyond this point, then it operates with greater decision. And how does it frequently express itself? What are the assumptions on which it rests? Do we not argue that, having satisfied all claims, and met every just demand, we may reasonably employ the residue as we choose? The fact that we have more than others may fairly be considered due to our exceptional history or thrift. And where would be the encouragement to cultivate these qualities, if their fruits are not to be enjoyed? But shall we cease to enjoy

them because they are to be devoted to the highest and holiest ends? Do they become things less to be desired and worked for, less to be prized when won, because we remember that we are precluded from using them for base and worldly purposes? Surely not. Here, too, the yoke of Christ is easy, and His burden is light. To the great majority of men, their money becomes, directly or indirectly, a source of care, and fretting anxiety. It introduces them to an ever-growing circle of wants, to sordid rivalries that embitter and degrade their character, or to a round of frivolous enjoyments that inevitably destroy all moral seriousness and strength. But if you keep steadfastly before you the fact that you are a steward of God, and called upon to spend your money in accordance with His will, then you will be delivered from the temptations to which money exposes you, and taste a higher blessedness than of itself it could ever afford. For what honour can be greater than being enabled to contribute to the progress of truth and righteousness? What joy can be purer than to feel that what you have earned by honourable toil, and thereby, perhaps, withdrawn from the selfish and sinful uses of the world, you are privileged to devote to the furtherance of some noble effort to reclaim the outcast, or relieve the suffering, or to carry the Gospel with its message of everlasting consolation, to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

But our Lord reminds us that we are not only stewards, but stewards who are soon to be withdrawn from their stewardship, and called to render an account. Without this our responsibility would merely be nominal, and soon cease to exercise any practical control upon our conduct. The day, however, is coming, and may be upon us at any moment, when there shall

be a strict and rigorous examination into all our intrusions with our Lord's goods. Have we kept His wishes steadily in view? Have we always considered His interests to be paramount, and allowed them to guide us in our whole administration of His gifts? These will be the questions that will have to be answered, and by which our fidelity will stand or fall. And what startling disclosures will then take place! How many servants will be found to have misappropriated their Master's money! How many benefactions will be seen to have been prompted by the thought that they discharged God's claims in full, and entitled us to use the remainder without troubling ourselves about Him! How much of what has appeared to be charity will be detected as the mere superficial gilding of selfishness, a little homage to the proprieties of our position, that we might enjoy behind it, without interruption, our own indolent or thoughtless ease.

If the remembrance of this coming audit, and of the fact that at any moment it might be demanded, were more present with us, it would surely sharpen the sense of our stewardship. Would there be so many who receive with a sort of resentment almost any appeal addressed to them for aid; who look upon the visitor who advocates the claims of some benevolent or Christian Society as a pickpocket in disguise, or at least, as an unwelcome intruder? Would there be so many who give only under constraint, and so as to convey the impression that they are suffering an injury instead of discharging a duty or enjoying a privilege? It was a true insight into our human nature that made our Lord represent the final destiny of men as dependent on their treatment of their neighbours, and especially of those who belonged to Him. For among the many

tests of character, I doubt if there is any that is at once more searching and accurate than this. The man whose heart is truly touched with a fellow-feeling for the sufferings of humanity, will find his sympathy regulating his life and asserting itself over the whole domain subject to his influence. It is an old saying, that you never know the captain of a vessel until you have sailed with him. And the reason is obvious. On board he is invested with an authority which no one can venture to dispute. There is no public opinion which he needs to respect, and no one whose word can compete with his own. And so I think you rarely know what a man is until you have to do with him about his money. This he looks upon as the little domain where, if anywhere, he and no other is master. Nobody has a right to question his use of it, and he enjoys the sense of importance which its possession imparts. But just because here he acts so freely and independently, it is here you see him in his truest colours. You will soon find whether the sympathy expressed in words has any root in reality. You discover how far kindly and amiable sentiments, or general assurances of good will, are to be accompanied by corresponding acts. You know whether the lust of the eye, and the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life count most with a man, or the love of the Father and the Father's will. And what furnishes so clear a clue to character even to us, is necessarily discerned with a far more penetrating and discriminating eye by Him with whom we have to do. Is it any wonder He should have said, "He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much." "If ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?"

But I pass on to what is the main lesson of the parable. The dishonest steward with but a few hours to run before his dismissal, promptly turned them to the best account. By a clever but unprincipled trick he made friends of his master's debtors, and provided for his future comfort. So, says Jesus, we are to use the time that remains to us before we are called to deliver up our trust. It is short, it may be far shorter than any of us think. And what of the future, that future into which you must enter without a scrap of anything you cling to here, when the material results of your toil and all you have gathered round you in these many years must be left behind: "For we brought nothing into the world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out?" Prepare for that future, He says, by using the present well, and especially by so using your substance, that "the blessing of those that are ready to perish" may await you there. "Make friends by the mammon of unrighteousness, that when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations."

It is necessary to interpose a word here by way of verbal explanation of the text. Mammon is the Syriac word for money, and not the name of a god, as some have mistakenly supposed. And mammon is called unrighteous, because our Lord is here contemplating the case of those who have been regarding it as their own, and ignoring God's proprietary rights. By so doing, they have made it "unrighteous mammon." It belongs to the category of misappropriated goods. The reception into the everlasting habitations is, of course, the language of poetry, suggested by the parallel passage in the parable in which the steward speaks of his master's debtors receiving him into their houses. But it contains a substantial truth—the truth that in



virtue of our kindness to Christ's brethren, we shall be welcomed by them into the kingdom prepared for us before the foundation of the world. It therefore embodies the same idea which we find in our Lord's picture of the last judgment, when He says, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, My brethren, ye have done it unto Me." We may paraphrase the verse, then, somewhat as follows:—"Use your worldly goods in so helping and ministering to the wants of others, that these, instead of accusing you in the judgment of indifference and neglect, may gratefully remember your goodness, and add to the joy of your reception into your eternal home."

If this counsel had only been followed, what misery and suffering would have been saved to the world! Almost all social revolutions have raged round the question of property. And what has pressed the question to the front has not been so much its unequal distribution, as its selfish and sometimes tyrannous use. Instead of using it as an instrument for making friends, it has been employed so as to excite the cupidity, the envy, and resentment of the poor. It has ministered to wantonness and luxury, when hundreds have been perishing for lack of food. It has robbed idleness in purple and the finest linen, when toil has worn its rags, or the willing worker has been reduced to despair for want of work to do. It has fostered a spirit of contempt and disdain for the multitude, a habit of considering and treating them as inferior animals, that has filled their minds with bitter thoughts, and made them question the title by which such an instrument of oppression and selfishness was held. Is it to be wondered at, that, unable to see where the root of the mischief lay, they have taken rough and ready means

to bring it to an end—that they have risen in revolt against the rich, and despoiled them of their wealth, or have proclaimed war against a social system which seemed created on purpose to keep them in a position of permanent inferiority? Any change, they have not unnaturally argued, must be for the better, and if existing institutions could only be effaced, and life and history commence afresh, the golden age would at last return to man. And thus it is that the revolving years have brought recurring eras of disaster. The enemies made by the selfish use of the mammon of unrighteousness have gradually accumulated and gathered strength, till the day of retribution has come. And so it will be still. The same causes will produce the same effects. If we refuse to recognise our stewardship, and use our worldly goods so as to excite the just resentment of our neighbours; if we implant in the breasts of others the conviction that we are treating them unjustly, and care nothing for their interests in comparison with our own; if we deepen class distinctions and widen the deadly breach between the rich and the poor, then we are making enemies who will not fail to seize their opportunity, and we are preparing a Nemesis that will be sure to find us out. And who can say that the day of reckoning may not come quickly? Who can look without apprehension on the increasing masses in so many of our large towns, always hovering on the brink of starvation, and tempted by the reckless extravagance that exists beside them? Who can witness without misgiving what seem to be traces of a tendency to withdraw and separate into rival camps those who have property and those who have none? Nor must we be too sure that habits of self-restraint and the resources of civilization will suffice to prevent a collision. Order



is never safe that does not spring out of the orderliness of the community itself; and long immunity from violence does not imply that violence will never come. On the contrary, it may beguile us into a delusive, and over confident safety, that will weaken the only resistance that can effectually arrest its course. The one preventive, the one infallible safeguard, lies in obedience to the teaching of Christ. "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness." Let no foolish pride inflict a wound on the feelings of your neighbour. Let no spirit of callous indifference embitter his heart. Let none have it in his power to prefer against you any charge of unbrotherliness, and then your right and title to your own will never be challenged. The temptation to take it from you will cease to exist. For who will administer it with greater fairness, or make it a means of wider good?

In one of the sunniest districts of France there stand the towers of a lordly *château*, rising partly on arches over a silvery stream, that flows like music through the land. Built in the joyous times of Francis the First, it is rich in historical souvenirs of all the centuries that have followed. And now, as then, it looks proudly over the smiling champagne and the dark circles of the distant woods. A century ago it was one of a hundred such. Now it is almost a solitary relic of the old *régime*, and is "touched with the tender grace of a day that is dead." When you ask how came it to escape the red ruin of the Revolution, and that breaking-up of laws that proved so fatal to the rest of its contemporaries, the answer is, because it belonged to one of noble character, who made benevolent and generous use of her princely revenue; and having made friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, not a finger was raised

against her in the day of anarchy and universal plunder, nor a whisper of hatred heard through all her broad domains.

But there is a higher consequence that flows from obedience to this word of Christ than the preservation of social order. It shows us, indeed, that to act as He would have us is the best policy even for this world, and that purely selfish motives might dictate deference to His authority. But it shows us more. It assures us that the results of our actions shall await us in the world to come, and especially that every good deed done to a disciple in His name, for only such can receive us into eternal habitations, will live in them and meet us with a grateful recognition in the great hereafter. And if it should seem to any that all this holds out a somewhat doubtful motive to benevolence, and that we ought to act generously without any view to recompense, the answer is at hand. It is true there are loftier motives urged elsewhere in Scripture, and this is not intended to supplant, but only to confirm and strengthen them. It is one, though by no means the chief, of many considerations, all of which are intended to influence and act upon the Christian. Besides, there is a doctrine of reward explicitly and consistently taught in the New Testament. The Gospel has to do with human nature as it is, and that nature is so constituted that we cannot help being influenced by the known results of our actions. If we are sure that a particular line of conduct will be followed by particular consequences, these must operate either as a deterrent or a stimulus. And it is better to do a good action from prudential motives than not to do it at all. Is it, moreover, so very ignoble to aim at filling our future with the thankful hearts of those whom we have succoured and loved? It is

infinitely more ignoble not to think of the future at all, and with blunt and dead susceptibilities sink our souls in the perishable present.

But all this may appear to be away from yourselves. There are not many of you, perhaps, who are richly dowered with this world's goods, and the exhortation of Jesus falls upon you with enfeebled force. Nevertheless, the great thing is to secure obedience to His teaching among His own professed disciples, to awaken a deeper sense of responsibility amongst us. The sins of the world are often encouraged by the connivance or indifference of the Church ; and what we need is, that each should clear himself of complicity with its selfish ways, and faithfully devote himself and all he has to the service of God, that He may widen the empire of brotherly kindness and charity.

To-day\* you are afforded an opportunity of doing something in this direction. Sometimes we find it difficult to discover channels that shall convey effective help to the poor and afflicted. Here you have a channel, into which your liberality is invited to flow, and which will ultimately distribute it over a vast area of suffering. I need not tell you how much that liberality is needed, nor how beneficent its action. Many of our Metropolitan Hospitals are reduced to the greatest straits. The increasing tide of misery that sweeps through their gates almost compels an expenditure in excess of their income, and makes retrenchment a matter of the greatest possible difficulty. Earnest hearts stand perplexed, contemplating with a bitter sorrow the prospect of curtailing their helpful ministries, and turning away the applicants who press for admission. They look to us to-day to settle the question. They await our decision.

\* Preached on Hospital Sunday.

If larger benefactions cannot be ours, let us see, at least, that our charity be not straitened to make room for self-indulgence or the lust of possession. Let the cry of distress break for a little the quiet comfort of our homes. And if God has given to us the blessing of health, let us show our thankfulness to Him by joyfully offering for the relief of others what He has absolved us from the necessity of using for our own. Who can tell how far-reaching and blessed its effects may be, and into how many hearts and homes it may carry its message of love and gladness? The mother is restored to her helpless children; the disabled breadwinner returns to his toil, and saves his household from ruin and the rates. The youth is rescued from permanent injury, and instead of being a life-long burden to his fellows, contributes to the general industry and wealth. Nor is it only by the immediate recipients the benefits of your charity will be felt. These hospitals are the best training schools for the physicians of the future. Without them the progress of medical science would be seriously arrested, and the whole community would suffer by receiving inferior and less effective treatment. To maintain them in undiminished strength is to provide the best equipment for those who are to protect the health and minister to the relief of society at large. It is to increase and multiply the skill which shall serve our own and coming generations, and in one of the best and surest ways to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness.

I pray you, therefore, to give as God has prospered you, and as your conscience tells you the importance of the object deserves. As a man sows, so shall he also reap. He that sows sparingly, shall reap sparingly, in thin and miserable handfuls. He that sows bountifully

shall reap abundantly, and gather his sheaves into his garner. The blessing of those who are ready to perish shall await him, and the dawn of his coming day shall be brightened by the joy of those whose dull and suffering hours were touched by the sunshine of his sympathy.

XV.

*THE SELFISHNESS OF SOCIETY.*

“When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind : and thou shalt be blessed ; for they cannot recompense thee : for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.”—  
ST. LUKE xiv. 13, 14.

## XV.

### *THE SELFISHNESS OF SOCIETY.*

THERE are certain passages of Scripture which are condemned to suffer an almost perpetual martyrdom. It is not because they are either unimportant or hard to understand, but rather because they seem to be pitched in too lofty and exacting a key. Among the number of these the words selected above may well be reckoned, and not a few others which might easily be quoted. How many, for instance, who hear the words, "He that hateth not father and mother is not worthy of Me," or, "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses," seriously consider that failure to observe them is as fatal to a man's Christianity as sins which proclaim their wickedness in the ears of the world? And yet it is easy to see that these peculiar or paradoxical sayings are the most severe and delicate tests of the state of religion in the soul: for a large proportion of the precepts of the Gospel are such as to win a general approval even from those who have little or no sympathy with its message of redemption. When our Lord condemns hypocrisy, or St. Paul exhorts that we should provide things honest in the sight of all men, that husbands and wives should love one another,



and children be obedient to their parents,—we acknowledge the reasonableness of such commands. But this we may do apart altogether from any respect to Christ, just as thousands have done who never heard of His name. Cicero, who died before He was born, and Seneca, the philosopher and Stoic, earnestly enjoined precisely the same kind of virtues. For we must remember that while Christianity imposes precepts peculiarly its own, it also covers the whole ground of natural ethics, by which I mean that it enjoins those duties which conscience would equally enjoin were there no other authority to impose them. In acknowledging therefore our obligation to observe such precepts we need not be governed by Christian motives even in the least. We may only be moved by the desire to live on comfortable terms with our neighbours or ourselves—with ourselves because our hearts would condemn us if we refused to observe them, or with our neighbours because our refusal would inevitably forfeit their esteem.

Now it cannot be denied that multitudes of those who profess Christianity never get farther than the discharge of these primary duties, and never even think of trying to do so. They imagine they are Christians because they discharge them after a fashion, and because the Gospel happens to include them. But, when you advance beyond what public opinion or the natural conscience demands, you find that most of them remain behind; and the higher you rise, the thinner their ranks become, till at last you discover it is a mere handful, a little flock, who are following Christ whithersoever He goes. Hence, I say, His most exacting sayings are the most searching tests of our spiritual condition. They embody what is most

unique and distinctive in His teaching. They demand what nobody else thinks of demanding, and their claim upon our observance is drawn exclusively from His authority. If we obey them, our obedience must spring out of deference to Him, if we do not, we decline to acknowledge His will whenever it exceeds the limits of conventional requirement. Of course the objection will at once be made that these extreme, so to speak, and paradoxical words of Christ cannot be taken in their literal sense, and therefore cannot contain anything fundamentally important. Whatever is essential will be stated in plain, unfigurative language, and not be veiled under a metaphor, or exaggerated into a hyperbole. And doubtless the objection is based on a sound principle—the principle that all vital truth will be clearly defined. And if the truths which Christ expresses in these particular ways were not expressed in any other way it might be wise to beware of investing them with too much significance. But then they are expressed in many other ways, and not only are they put in plain and direct terms, but they also inform and underlie the whole body of His teaching. The reason why He throws them occasionally into such striking and unusual shapes is to attract attention, and prevent us, if possible, from passing them by. We ourselves resort to the same device when we wish to make a thing prominent, or clear beyond the possibility of mistake. We try to magnify it. We enlarge its proportions, and make each feature sharp and distinct. And Christ projected truths into bold and obtrusive relief, distended their outline to the farthest possible limits, just that we might understand He meant us to see them, and not on any account to put them aside. So that the unwonted forms they assume, instead of

justifying our neglect make it in reality all the more inexcusable. And this becomes obvious if you consider what they teach. You remember how often He spoke of the necessity of self-denial, and of the reproach and persecution His disciples should have to endure. But how could He have put this more nakedly before our eyes than by saying, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." For the cross was then the symbol of shame, and as every criminal carried his own to the place of execution, the mere fact of one's taking it up showed that he was willing to lose his life for Christ's sake; or, as St. Paul puts it, to die daily. Again we are struck in reading the Gospels by the calm and imperial claims which Christ makes upon our homage. To honour Him is to honour the Father. We must trust Him with a faith which nothing else must be allowed to impair, and be ready at any moment to leave all at His summons. But we know how hard it is to keep everything subordinate to Him, and how apt we are to let even lawful desires strengthen within us, till they weaken, if they do not dissolve, His hold upon our hearts. And knowing our danger, how could He have warned us against it in more startling terms than by declaring, that "If any man . . . hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." So also with the words of my text. It was no unwonted thing for Christ to warn His hearers against the social selfishness of His time, and the straining after earthly distinctions and rewards. He saw that much of the intercourse, and many of the friendships of the world were due to purely selfish considerations, and that wealth was wasted in playing a worse than childish

game which withdrew it from nobler and more useful ends. Accordingly, when He found Himself in the house of a Pharisee who had invited a distinguished circle of friends, in order to display his hospitality and court a return of the compliment, He took occasion to expose the complete contradiction of such a course of conduct to the spirit of His Gospel. "When thou makest a dinner or a supper," He said, "call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just." Here again we are not to suppose that Christ condemns the interchange of friendly hospitality, or desires us to reduce our expenditure to the barest necessities of life, and share everything else with our less fortunate brethren. Neither of these things comes into the question at all. He presupposes and takes for granted our ordinary courtesies and social arrangements. He knows that other motives than love to Him will be sufficient to secure our being hospitable to our own relations, and to congenial and well-to-do neighbours. But He wishes us to advance beyond what natural affection or self-interest suggests, and consider those to whom we are not attracted by special affinities or the hope of receiving a return. What He condemns is spending money on giving entertainments to those about whom we are perfectly indifferent, and whom we should never think of asking to our houses but for the expectation of being asked to theirs. In fact He condemns the too common custom of cultivating friendships for the sake of what they may bring—a

custom which measures a man by the kind of circle to which he may introduce you, or the amount of enjoyment or promotion which he may be able to put in your way.

Let us, therefore, consider for a little—first, the course which our Lord disapproves; and, second, the course which He recommends.

I. There can be no doubt that the course which Jesus here disapproves is the one that is still most generally followed. Indeed, it is alarming to think on how thoroughly selfish a basis the friendships of this world rest. The bonds that draw people together are mainly of the most mercenary sort. Society, by which I mean the intercourse which people have ~~over and above what~~ is required by domestic and business necessities—in other words, their spontaneous voluntary intercourse—is marvellously hollow and insincere. What is the end of it? Why does it exist? Is it that people may really get to know each other better, that they may administer mutual help or encouragement, and foster a benevolent or manly spirit? Is it that by the measure of unity it affords they may be able with greater vigour and a more irresistible strength to pursue some lofty and magnanimous aim? Who can say so? Is it not rather a vain show, as the Scripture calls it—an atmosphere of continual trivial excitements, of smothered and paltry jealousies that fret and eat away the finer susceptibilities of the soul? Is not the end of it mere dissipation, the squandering of strength on trifles; and that by men and women of real capacity and resource, as though steam were made only for blowing off into the air, or a locomotive used up in drawing perambulators? And yet how eagerly people bid for it, even people who call

themselves Christians! How much they will stake to get within the charmed ground, especially to reach its more exclusive circles, forgetting that the farther they advance the more rapid the vortex, and the more difficult that calm reflection and sober self-control, without which the fear of God is utterly impossible.

Perhaps some will demur to this as a little extravagant and overdrawn. You will say that society is not like this—at least, not all. You will remind me that many apparently good and churchgoing people are to be found within its pale, and that you may act like a sprinkling of salt that keeps it from decay, and seasons it with a savour of sanctity. Well, you must see that you are not deceiving yourselves, and shelving the real issue because its serious consideration may prove unpleasant. There cannot be Christian society which has not a Christian object, or at least does not coincide with Christian aims. If it is something apart from the line of our life, like a loop which only marks its departure from its point of destination, if it cannot be incorporated with it so as to develop and promote its growth, then it is plainly something with which we have nothing to do. It is an interruption, a withdrawal of energy from our main pursuit, a recreation if you will, but a recreation which, though it may refresh us for something else, does not refresh us for the professed work of our lives. Let us, then, ask ourselves one or two questions. Do our social engagements contribute to the strength of our Christian character? Do they tend to make us more active and earnest in the serious business before us, as all recreation should? Or, do they leave behind the exhaustion and weariness that succeeds excitement? Do they impress you with a



graver and loftier notion of duty, such as becomes one who is to stand before God? Do they add depth to your devotions or zest to your study of Scripture? Or, do they rather indispose you to turn to the great realities of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come? If so, how can you reconcile them with faithfulness to Christ? How can you suppose you are living in accordance with His commands, and are conscientiously trying to follow His example? Will you trifle so foolishly with your eternal welfare? Will you expose your spiritual nature to the action of forces that can only bring you into misery and loss? Surely it has not ceased to be true, that, "if any man love the world the love of the Father is not him."

But it is not so much the excitement and dissipation of excessive social enjoyment which Christ condemns, as the calculating, sordid spirit which too often regulates its whole arrangement. What is the motive that guides the choice of our friendships, and determines the esteem in which we hold them? Is it sterling excellence of character and consistency of Christian behaviour, according to the principle of St. Paul, who ~~knew~~ no man after the flesh? Or do we make a man our neighbour just because he is rich and in a good position, while we disdain to be brotherly to anyone else? It cannot be deemed that this is the principle on which men generally act. They look out for friends whose friendship will improve their status, or procure them an entrance into a better set. They think most of those who can do most for them, and they will lay themselves out to entertain them in the hope of receiving some future favour in return. The attention which they pay to a man is proportionate precisely to what they expect to receive, or believe he can do.

And so strong has this tendency become, so absorbing the pursuit of self-advancement, that anyone who commands exceptional influence or wealth will be forgiven the most flagrant faults for the sake of the patronage he is able to dispense. Selfishness so blinds us to the faults of others who can advance our aims, we are tempted to make light of moral distinctions that lie at the very root and basis of our social well-being. And it is shameful to think how people who call themselves Christians will varnish the sins of the wealthy and find all sorts of apologies for them which they can never by any chance find for the poor. It is shameful they should grudge nothing on those who receive their kindness with indifference, if not with disdain, when there are so many who would bless them even for the crumbs that fall from their tables. If half the money that is spent on thankless hospitality that neither blesses him who gives nor him who takes—that only goes to keep up the monotonous round of waste and weariness—were given to the service of Christ, to foster wise and manly effort for the relief and elevation of the outcast, how many a drooping agency would be revived, how many a mission would leap forward on a new career of victory, how many hearts would be gladdened! We do not need new discoveries in social economics for solving the problems of our time. We only need faithfully to apply the teaching of Christ to our own lives, and to labour to procure its recognition in the lives of others. The more fully it is followed, the more nearly realised, the more effectually will it “ring out the feud of rich and poor,” and “ring in redress to all mankind.”

II. What, then, is it to which Christ exhorts us? in what direction does He bid us advance? He tells



us that when we make a feast we are to call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and we shall be blessed. Then He adds as the reason, that they cannot recompense us again. Disengaging the truth which is taught us here from the particular connection in which it occurs, we find He inculcates that spirit of unselfishness which does not contemplate or seek for a present reward. We should naturally expect that to whatever extent the opposite principle prevailed elsewhere it should find no place within the precincts of the Christian Church. There we should anticipate our Lord's command to be fairly carried out, its members to be bound by a common devotion to Him, and all their worship and work to be prompted by the same controlling force. But are we able to say that this is the case? Do we not find that the same selfishness which governs the world traverses the boundaries of Christ's kingdom, and lies like a blight upon its energies? When our Church connection and public worship of God, is determined not so much by the desire to magnify Him, or to receive some spiritual profit to ourselves, as to improve our social environment, what is this but a contravention in another sphere of our Lord's command? And when we hear such complaints of coldness and aloofness in our Christian congregations, what does it mean? May it not mean that worshippers look too much for certain social advantages, and are only betraying their disappointment at having failed to receive them? But may it not also mean that those who have it in their power to be friendly, think first whether it is convenient to know their neighbours in the next pew, and only secondly, if at all, of the help that might be given by a kind and courteous brotherly recognition?

In either case we forget the words and example of Him whom we ought to follow. We fail to cultivate the charity that is kind, and is not puffed up, and we carry the cold and frigid influence of the outer air into what should be the warm and genial atmosphere of the Church of God.

But the principle receives its direct application in another and a wider area. It inculcates the spirit of the good Samaritan, the doing of good for its own sake or rather for Christ's sake. It directs us to give where our gift is most required, and will confer the largest amount of happiness. It aims at levelling up the fearful inequalities which selfishness and greed have made in the surface of our social life, and healing the divisions which have cleft it down even to its roots. The world's hospitality administered in the manner which our Lord condemns has all the other effect. It exaggerates the evils under which we suffer. It feeds the great sore of luxury, a sore that consumes the resources which by a more equal and generous distribution would do much to restore the health and soundness of the body politic. It is more than a sin, it is a blunder that will receive its recompense of retribution at the hands of those whom it has neglected and despised. Yet, let us beware of a travesty of our Lord's words not uncommon in those days of busy religiousness. It is one thing to do good for His sake, another thing to do good for the sake, though not of a present, yet of a future reward. In the latter case we are still governed by selfishness, though by a selfishness that looks a little farther ahead. Our Lord in stating that such a reward will certainly come, assures us that kindness to those who cannot repay it will not fail of its repayment from Him. But this

is not to be the chief, still less the only, motive of the kindness. For then it would cease to be kindness, and become a species of exchange in which something were given in consideration of something else to be received. Besides it would encourage that spirit of self-righteousness which rests the hope of salvation upon our own good works instead of receiving it freely as the gift of God. And such a spirit not only despoils our service of its Christian character, but makes it an insidious substitute for the obedience of Christ. What He requires is a charity that seeketh not her own, the single eye that looks to Him and is indifferent to the praise and censure of men, the guileless heart that only thinks of following Him, and loses even the consciousness of any other judge or critic of its actions. And if you say that this would prescribe a most exceptional course of conduct, which even the professed disciples of Christ would resent as a reflection upon their laxity, we must remember that to be a Christian is to be something exceptional. Has not Christ said, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it"? And has He not therefore added "Strive—" or as it might be rendered "Agonize"—"to enter in"? The odds against us are great. There needs, as it were, a certain violence by which the kingdom of God must be taken by force, a struggle against the stream, a separation of ourselves from the multitude, like that of the man who feels himself in danger of being carried past the point he is making for, and resolutely shoulders and clears his way through, till he gains it at the last. And should you be tempted to think that the ordinary habit of so-called Christendom has grown too rigid to be resisted; that the conventional

view of what Christ requires makes it all but impossible for solitary souls to rise above it; is not this to disbelieve the possibility of being a Christian at all, to be forgetful of the faith that overcomes the world? Is it not the way in which numbers let slip the beginning of their confidence, and resign themselves to what they consider an inevitable destiny? History has shown that almost every advance, every break from an effete or corrupt state of things into a larger life, has been accomplished by the strength of individual wills. Conviction has grown in intensity and depth till a protest against everything that contradicts it has become a matter no longer of choice, but of necessity. And regardless of consequences it boldly proclaims itself, and gives effect to the truth whose significance it has grasped. Eventually the world follows in the wake of the stronger, of the clearer and more prophetic thinker, of the more vigorous and fearless man of action. And what at first it violently resisted as extravagant and revolutionary it ultimately accepts quietly as a matter of course. So it is also with the Church of Christ. If you trace the various streams of influence that have contributed to its progress, you will find they have taken their departure from some one or more faithful souls to whom truth has emerged into a purer and more luminous atmosphere. Not disobedient to the heavenly vision they have followed it with loyal and unfaltering steps, till at last the discovery of one, received at first with cries of alarm, and branded it may be with opprobrious names, has become the recognised and priceless possession of all. But such visions and convictions rarely, if ever, come but to the man of open mind and honest character. If we close our hearts against the glimmerings

of higher truths because they seem to point us to too lofty an ideal, or involve a disturbance of the existing order that will demand too large a measure of self-sacrifice, they shall cease to visit us. We shall be left on the lower levels to which we have consigned ourselves, to the dimmer lights and deeper shadows of a timid and fearful faith to which a sight of the higher peaks and the silent stars above them has been lost for ever.

Let us beware, therefore, of making up our minds to a partial observance of Christ's commands, of supposing that all we have to do is to keep as many as are allowed to be reasonable and within our reach. If we do this we may keep those which our natural temper finds to be congenial, but we shall reject those which by their very unselfishness would bring to light the evil of our hearts and our need of regenerating grace. Remember that Christian obedience presupposes spiritual life, and that spiritual life is the fruit of a spiritual birth. The precepts of the Gospel seem unpractical, and its ideal a dream, only when divorced from the provision made for their attainment in the grace and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But if you have taken Him to be your Saviour, that He may break the bondage of sin, and rule you according to His Word, then it is your duty trusting in His help to apply His teaching fearlessly and frankly to your own heart, and to your intercourse with your neighbours. It is thus His kingdom comes. It is thus the leaven works. And every true and honest soul who resolves that he shall give Christ's truth fair play within him, and free expression everywhere around him, will do more to break up the weight of evil custom than thousands of worldly worshippers who say, Lord ! Lord ! but do not all things whatsoever He has commanded them.

XVI.

*THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST*

"Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love,"—EPH. iv. 16.

## XVI.

### *THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST.*

THE comparison of the Church of Christ to a body is one familiar to every reader of St. Paul's Epistles. Suggested by the undue preference of the Corinthians for the power of speaking with unknown tongues he used it to show them the necessity for a diversity of spiritual gifts. As one limb, however wonderful, will not of itself constitute a body, so no one development of life or energy will suffice for the manifold purposes of the Church of God. Each must combine a variety of members corresponding to the numerous and sometimes delicate functions which it has to fulfil. And not only so; these several members are closely dependent one upon another, and so intimately inter-related that all are bound together in an inseparable community of interest.

In the Epistle to the Romans the Apostle uses the same comparison to enforce the same truth. And in his later Epistles, in which the organization of the Church comes more prominently into view, he naturally reverts to it as providing him with an appropriate and instructive illustration. For instance, in the letter to the Colossians he describes the heretics among them, whom he specially wrote to refute, as not "holding the Head, from which



all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God." And in the words of my text the comparison is worked out into greater detail, and extended so as to embrace all the points of resemblance. The corporate character of the Church, the source of her life, together with the manner and aim of her development, are set before us with great brevity and clearness.

I. First of all the Church itself is spoken of in terms that suggest both the inter-adaptation and cohesion of its parts. As in the natural body there is no friction between the several members, but all work smoothly together, so it is in the body of Christ. Different gifts are not to be ranged in rivalry, as though each existed irrespectively of the rest, and with a view to independent ends. Each contributes in its own way to the efficiency of the whole, so that none can be suppressed or unduly discouraged without the general good being a sufferer thereby. Moreover, each in itself is incomplete, and depends upon others for producing its full and appropriate effect, as musical notes only attain their maximum of expression in harmonious combinations. For instance, the Church of Christ requires evangelistic zeal, otherwise she would fail to propagate herself; but she also requires administrative gifts, or she would fail to utilize her resources and consolidate her conquests. She needs theologians, to unfold the fulness of truth; apologists, who can keep an observant eye upon the more exposed portions of her creed; historians, who can trace the development of her life and teaching; economists, who can point out her relation to the shifting social problems of the times. But she needs also those who can turn the results of such scientific labours to practical account—toilers among the masses, teachers

of the young, men who will work out as well as men who will think out schemes of benevolence and Christian philanthropy. All are needful, and all are mutually indispensable. In the same way it may be said, applying the principle on a larger scale, that those divisions in the Church which have resulted in the formation of different Communion, though in many cases much to be deplored, have yet been overruled so as to contribute elements of strength which otherwise she might not have possessed. We can see that in some of her branches the comparative looseness of their arrangements has fostered the sentiment of individual freedom, while in others graduated methods of government have taught us how the will of each should be made subordinate to the good of the whole. We can see, too, that the literature of different denominations assumes a corresponding peculiarity of tone, emphasizes particular aspects of doctrine, and tends to produce a distinctive type of Christian character. And the Church on the whole is the better for this. She acquires greater fulness and breadth. She represents more adequately the catholicity and many-sidedness of spiritual culture. And she is preserved by the interaction of her various parts, with the checks and limitations which they mutually impose, from giving expression too exclusively to any one conception of doctrine or of ritual. Truths receive a hearing which otherwise might be overborne in the interests of a popular party or a dominant theology; convictions find breathing room which might be ruthlessly extinguished; and piety instead of being crushed into one mould, or cultivated after a single pattern, unfolds itself more freely, and in a richer, more picturesque, and more attractive variety.

It is in such directions as these we find a compensation

for that disintegration of Christendom which resulted from the great awakening of the sixteenth century. The numerous divisions which it almost immediately developed have been an undoubted source of weakness and danger. They have encouraged at times an undue freedom of enquiry which has always tended to run into scepticism. They have led to a lamentable waste of energy, to much recrimination and bitterness of feeling; and they have deprived the Church of the authority which resides in the utterance of an undivided voice. But humanly speaking they have made impossible some of those evils which for a thousand years assailed the foundations of her life. She is not likely to lend herself again to such a wholesale corruption of doctrine as that which culminated in the sacrifice of the Mass. She is not likely to be so puffed up with the pride of wealth as to prostitute her spiritual functions to political and hierarchical aims. Nor will the spirit of enquiry ever again be stifled, and the long enjoyed liberty of modern thought submit to the shackles of a time-serving bigotry that cares only for the preservations of its selfish prerogatives. It is well, and nothing less than our duty, to remove needless causes of separation that only dissipate our resources and enervate our efforts. But there is a craving betraying itself here and there for realising on a larger scale the visible unity of the Church of Christ—a dream of a reconstruction of Christendom, which is the fond fancy of some devout and of some diseased imaginations, which involves a surrender of the gains of more than three centuries without the slightest prospect of a single compensating advantage. The removal of existing lines of demarcation, the fusion of bodies now but slightly and superficially divided, and still more the combination of those

whom deep doctrinal differences have held apart, is not to be effected by dexterous diplomacy, or by trifling readjustments of ecclesiastical order. That is to exalt the form above the substance, to mistake uniformity in external arrangements for oneness of spirit and life, and is certain to be productive of greater evils than any of those it was intended to cure. The voice of God, speaking in the page of history, has pronounced against such mechanical attempts at unity, and has equally condemned the inclusion of all Christians in one organization controlled by a single supreme authority. And whatever approaches may be made to the comprehension in outward fellowship of those who are now standing asunder will only be valuable in so far as they result from a nearer approach to Christ Himself, from a clearer insight into and a closer relationship to the heart of the truth, and from a more generous and disinterested recognition of the good to be found in all. But it is possible to make too much of such outward oneness, and it certainly is not essential to that compactness, or being knit together, to which St. Paul refers. The unity of the body consists in the mutual adaptation of its limbs, and their obedience to the head. Its strength depends on the care of each for the rest, and the healthy co-operation of all, while weakness inevitably ensues if any one member sets an undue value upon itself, or imagines it can dispense with the services of the others. So, if each separate body of Christians recognises the fact of its own insufficiency, and is content to contribute its share to the perfecting of the kingdom of God, then it is ministering in the most effective way to its consolidation and advance. But if any is sinful enough to claim the rights of the whole, or to deny to others their place and purpose

within it, that one is the true offender against the unity of the Church, and the standing cause of disturbance and schism.

II. Secondly : The sole source of the Church's life is Christ. From Him the whole body is fitly joined together and compacted. Theoretically this truth is universally conceded. All Christians admit that from Christ originally every gift and quickening influence proceeds. The points of difference appear when you begin to ask about the means through which these are conveyed. For all again are equally agreed that as a rule they come not directly, but by some intermediary channel. The Church of Rome declares the priesthood to be the sole medium of grace to individual souls ; and the Reformed Churches, while rejecting this sacerdotal assumption, have attached varying degrees of importance to the different means of edification which Scripture has enjoined. In this, however, they are of one mind : that they condemn their being invested with a value that tends to raise them above their subordinate position, and obscure that fountain of life from which they must ever receive all their inspiring power. They are helpful in so far as they bring its refreshing streams within our reach, in so far as they make the truth more impressive and convincing. But whenever they tempt us to rest in themselves without going farther, or so engage our attention that we cannot readily see beyond them, then they defeat their own end and become positively hurtful. So that the great thing is to keep in mind that it is to Christ Himself in the last resort we must be indebted, and that anything connected with the Church is serviceable to us just in so far as it brings us into connection with Him. For what is true of the whole Church is also true of its individual members ; and,

indeed, only becomes true of her by being true of them. It is by that which every joint supplies, by the contact of souls each with its living Lord, that she is fitly joined together and compacted. And every dead soul, everyone who though connected with her is yet not connected with Him, arrests the flow of her vitality, and interrupts the continuity and harmony of her action. If you are not united to Christ, if you are satisfied with the mere act or order of worship, with such knowledge about Him as may subsist independently of fellowship *with* Him, you are receiving nothing that goes to make a Christian, or through which you can enrich the activities of His kingdom. It is in coming directly to our Lord Himself, in using His words as lifting you up to an apprehension of His mercy you first feel the touch of Divine life, and are quickened into a new consciousness of God. It is in continuing so to use them, and in rising with ever increasing ease and spontaneity to Him of whom they testify, you grow in faith, in devoutness, and in strength. But let us see that our life is drawn in very deed from this sustaining source, and that we are not mistaking an interest in His Church for a personal interest in Christ Himself. What is it that attaches you to the creed of Christianity? What inclines you to accord it a preference? Is it reasons of expediency, or respect for its traditional claims, or accommodation to custom? These things explain the religion of many. But there is only one explanation that can truly satisfy the conscience—and that is, attachment to Christ on the ground of your indebtedness to Him. Any other link of connection will not stand the manifold trials of life, and will certainly be dissolved at that hour of death when everything shall loosen itself from us that has not



entered into the substance of our character. Or, to put the question in another way, what is it about your religion that gives you hope for the future, and seems to make it worth your while to go on observing its requirements? Is it that it seems to hold out the prospect of pardon on your treating its ordinances with becoming respect, or rendering a fair measure of obedience to its commands? If so, you are drawing your encouragement not from Christ, but from what you yourself are doing or hope to do. If you look on His atonement only as something that gives additional value to your attempts to please God, or as a supplement to their defects; if it requires some contribution on your side, without which it would prove insufficient for your wants; then it is on this contribution of yours you depend, and your hope will rise or fall in proportion to the degree in which you are able to render it. Certainly it is not Christ that inspires you, and leads you to expect good things to come, nor are you drawing from Him the life that would make you one in sympathy and effort with those who are carrying on the work of His kingdom.

III. Thirdly: St. Paul here describes the manner of the Church's growth. It is harmonious, according to the working in due measure of each several part. As the excessive growth of any one limb disfigures the body and impairs its general usefulness, so the undue cultivation of any special gift, or the over-accentuation of any particular doctrines, will lead to a one-sided development of the Church's activity and life. In order to advance there must be some sort of equilibrium and unity of movement. Growth is not growth when, in a complex organism, it only involves a part of the whole. It is simply a process of malformation. In like manner

extreme developments of ritualism or extreme protests against it; exclusive devotion to one favourite truth, without paying attention to others that counter-balance and correct it; an absorbing pursuit of one kind of excellence or usefulness—contribute not to the strength but to the weakness of the Church. Still more of course if any of her branches fall into spiritual death is her progress retarded. She is rendered incapable of acting in that direction, and has to spend strength that might have been employed elsewhere in efforts to revive the paralyzed portion of her own body. The real trouble of the Church is not outward opposition, but the numbness that has fallen upon her own limbs. While her hands are busy fomenting them into life, her enemies seize the opportunity to harass and assail her. Ground that she might have occupied had she been free to advance, has been occupied and fortified against her. As an army of invasion can do little if half the able-bodied are told off to wait upon the sick and wounded, so neither can the Church do much if half her vigour needs to be devoted to the ignorant and superstitious within her own pale. And this is quite as true of particular communities or congregations of Christians. Their growth depends upon the working in due measure of each several member. If you do not realise your own individual responsibility, the obligation lying upon you to contribute to the efficiency of the body of which you form a part, you are not likely to profit it much. And if you fail to be profitable you are a constant source of weakness, you hamper and inconvenience its action. You are expected to do something, but you habitually disappoint and discourage your neighbours. You have taken upon you vows of loyalty to Christ, but no one can see where your loyalty is, or what it constrains



you to do. You represent Christianity in a dull, lifeless, apathetic way, and some are led by your example to do the same, while others hold back, and refuse to advance before one who ought to be so much better a judge than themselves of what is becoming and right. In short, you lend your influence, though it may be without intending it, to recommending a religion that does nothing, that carries you backwards and forwards between your place of worship and your home, but somehow never promotes the life of your soul or stimulates the work of your hands. What, then, is your Church or congregation the better for you? Do you contribute to its energy, its usefulness, its liberality? The testimony of the truth has to be maintained from age to age and borne over a yearly extending area. Do you take your fair share in supporting the ministry, and in providing that the message of the Gospel shall be handed down to a coming generation in all its integrity? If you lost a limb either by some sudden stroke, or by wasting disease, you would certainly feel the loss, and for a time at least be acutely pained by a sense of deprivation. But if the Church lost you, would she feel that virtue had gone out of her? Would there be any—even a momentary—sense of weakness, or would she go on as if nothing had happened? It is only a dead limb that is never missed, the reason being it has already ceased to be useful, and its removal takes away nothing that was worth retaining. I pray you, therefore, to see that you are doing your duty by your brethren, and not adding to their burdens and the heaviness of their work. Look humbly to your Lord that He may bless and quicken you. Ask Him to show you wherein you come short, or whereby you may honour and serve Him. You may not perchance be

able to do much, measured by the outward standard of men. But the energies of Christ's Church are fed from hidden springs, springs that send forth their living water in response to patient and expectant prayer. And He who knows the heart, and has given to each of us according to our several ability, knows also when we are using for Him the gift He has bestowed. And if it is true that unto whom much is given of him also much will be required, it is also true that poor and feeble though our service be it will be none the less acceptable to our Lord if He can say of us, "He hath done what he could."

Lastly, brethren, St. Paul sets before us the goal or aim of the Church's growth: that it may edify itself in love. We see from this that it has been an inward development that has been throughout before his mind. It was not her size, or wealth, or social influence he thought of, but her increase in a distinctly different element. These really have nothing whatever to do directly with her growth. They may serve as a sign or index of her advance, but they also may not. Her decline in any of them may be a symptom of retrogression, but her progress in all of them may not be attended by a corresponding increase in spiritual life. The essential characteristic is love. And she goes backwards or forwards as this lessens or enlarges. Judged by this standard she has sometimes sunk to the lowest point when she seemed to have reached the highest. The Church of mediæval times was bigoted, intolerant, and high-handed in her treatment of the flock of Christ. And since then, whenever she has attained a decided pre-eminence, she has been disposed to forget the charity that seeketh not her own. On the other hand, in eras of persecution and distress,

when she has been stripped of her possessions, and scattered abroad, as when of old she was driven into Roman catacombs, and many times since, the enthusiasm and mutual attachment of her members has been the one thing that has challenged and received admiration. "See how these Christians love one another!" has been the involuntary exclamation of the world.

But remember that the love to which St. Paul refers is not merely a sentiment or feeling of fervour. He speaks of that grace which is the fulfilling of the law, and synonymous with the bearing of one another's burdens. And here, again, his illustration serves to elucidate the truth. For the members of the body are not only knit together in mutual sympathy, each sharing in the prosperity or suffering of the rest, but they relieve each other so far as they can. They recognise the fact that the health and comfort of every several part is a matter of common concern. And so it ought to be with us. If we have the Spirit of our Master we shall not be indifferent to anything that affects the condition of His kingdom. No one section of His followers can afford to neglect or despise any other, however insignificant or small. The deadness of a neighbouring communion is not likely to enliven our own, and should fill us with regret, and not with spiteful satisfaction. Its energy on the other hand is almost sure to stir us into rivalry, or at least to press home upon us our own defects. We are all too closely related to be able, with impunity, to look solely upon our own things. And we grow as communions, or individual congregations, in so far as we build ourselves up in a spirit of mutual helpfulness, united prayer, and endeavour; in so far as we recognise the necessity of making ourselves responsible for the progress and

prosperity of the whole. But if you will neither bear any share of the common burden yourself, nor help those who are giving their strength to the task, you can hardly be said to be promoting the edifying of the body in love. Let each conscientiously ask himself what he is doing to enrich and sweeten the life of his communion? What are you doing to remove obstacles, to facilitate work, to foster a spirit of brotherly kindness, to encourage a hopeful, cheerful, enthusiastic temper in those round about you? And if you feel that you have never thought it necessary to do anything in this way at all; that you have imagined you had done all that could be expected when you came and worshipped and went your way; remember that worship is not an end in itself, but a means to more devoted and self-sacrificing service, and go to your Lord and ask Him to teach you to think less selfishly, and to act more manfully. The joy of your worship, the brightness and gladness of your life, will be increased tenfold when you are conscious of ministering to the happiness of others; when good work goes on apace, because of the helping hand which you cheerfully lend to it; when you see some encouraged by your example to lay aside their timidity, and others quickened into a livelier sense of duty, so that you all give yourselves with one mind to the edifying of the body of Christ.



XVII.

*OF THE CHIEF GOOD.*

“We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”—  
ROM. viii. 28.

## XVII.

### *OF THE CHIEF GOOD.*

ABOUT fifty years or so before Christ, a cultivated Roman represents himself as discoursing pleasantly with his friends on the momentous question of the supreme good. With great skill and clearness he states and explains the views of the rival philosophers who had made this the subject of elaborate discussion. But after a calm and dispassionate survey of the whole field, he puts down his pen without a word to indicate in which direction his own preference lay. In this, perhaps, he represented the majority of the thoughtful men of his time. To them, life was a problem without any sure key to its solution, an arena on which incongruous and conflicting forces, whose laws and tendencies were alike inscrutable, played themselves out. It baffled speculation. It refused to be amenable to any theory.

About fifty years after Christ, or a century later, there were living in Rome and its adjacent districts a community of men who had arrived at the most novel and astonishing conclusions on this very point. Though they were few in number, of insignificant position, and counting scarcely any of the learned in their ranks, they were persuaded that all the complex and



varied experiences of life were specially disposed to enable them to reach the highest blessedness, and they were not in the least doubt as to what that blessedness was. The explanation of the phenomenon was not to be found in any political or social revolution, for things had substantially continued as they were, and had perhaps, if anything, changed for the worse. There were the same sufferings, poverty, and distress; the same wars and tumults; the same cruelty, tyranny, and oppression. But something had happened in the interval which had set them in a new relation to all these things: and this was that the love of God, revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, had been shed abroad in their hearts. That this should have produced so settled and clear a conviction in people so obscure, scattered, and numerically feeble, is surely a wonderful thing. But the conviction was not open to the slightest doubt, and it flowed directly from the truth which they had been enabled to receive. "We know," says the Apostle, speaking for his readers as well as for himself, "that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

I. Now, first, what was the good towards which everything is here declared to co-operate. Though the expression may be indefinite in itself it was quite plain to those to whom St. Paul was writing, and no one can be much at a loss to understand what he means. What is good to a Christian can only be what Christ has pronounced such, or in other words what contributes to our becoming what He wishes us to be. This latter is the supreme, or highest, good; and it is defined in a single phrase in the verse that follows, as likeness to Himself, that we should be conformed to the image of God's Son. If you consider

what is involved in this pregnant expression, you will see how truly it describes what alone can be the supreme good for man. That can never consist in anything external to Himself, for all such things are in their very nature inferior to Him, and are intended to serve as stepping-stones to something higher. To possess much, for instance, is in itself a doubtful advantage. For everything depends on how we use our possessions, and the manner in which our use of them re-acts upon our character. They may be sources of temptation which we are not strong enough to resist, or they may become an end in themselves and reduce us to mere accumulators of material which we must shortly transfer to other hands. So evident is this that happiness has always been seen by the most earnest thinkers to consist in what we are and not in what we have. What we have is separable from ourselves. What we are is inalienably our own. But what we are, as a matter of fact, is precisely that which hinders our happiness, and which we feel must somehow become different from what it is. And the question is, How are we to compose those inward evils in our nature which we all know to be the fountain of our misery? How are we to become such as to be truly blessed? To answer this we must find the perfect man, some one who has succeeded in being what it will be our blessedness to become, and who can help us to become like himself. Otherwise we shall only embark in a round of endless experiments, or throw up the attempt as incapable of success. Now Christ has shown us human nature as it ought to be. He is God's conception of manhood realised. In Him was reached that complete equilibrium and repose of all our frailties in which true

blessedness consists. In Him there was no inward contradiction, no strife of lawless desires, no root of bitterness, no want which filled his heart with a continual ache. To be truly blessed, therefore, is to be like Him, and there is no other blessedness conceivable for us. To suppose we can find it in any other conception of character is to condemn ourselves to being less than men; it is to lay up a store of endless disappointment and pain.

It is true that when Christ came He was not recognised as being what He really was. But this was due to the fact that men had created false ideals for themselves, and were blinded by their own prepossessions. They were not prepared for a type of goodness whose essence lay in submission to God's will and absolute purity of heart. They looked for something more outwardly regal and commanding, and because He crossed and rebuked their prevailing conceptions, it was inevitable the world should despise and reject Him. Yet there were some who had eyes to see and ears to hear. They had been led into a deeper acquaintance with the mysteries of their own nature, and they discerned in Him what they themselves lacked, and believed He was able to supply it. It is in these men and in these alone you find the conviction that at last they have solved "the riddle of the painful earth." When you turn over the pages of heathen literature, you read there the language of perplexity and despair. Doubt has filled it with its dark shadow. There is the voice of the weary, the sigh of the heavy laden, the recklessness of the desperate, "the cry as of some strong swimmer in his agony"—Who will show us any good? When you turn to the New Testament you see it sparkling with

a new vocabulary. "The darkness is passing away, and the true light now shineth." This is what you hear: "We rejoice in Christ Jesus;" "We glory in tribulations;" "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me;" "All things are yours;" "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." In short, in the New Testament, and there alone, in that period of the world's history you find the language of men whose hearts have found their true resting-place, their chiefest good, their eternal portion, in the Son of God. And so still it is only in those who are partakers of their faith you find the same sure and humble hope, the same bright outlook, the same radiant joy, the same sense of triumph over the ills of life:

"My heart is resting, O my God;  
I will give thanks and sing.  
My heart is at the secret source  
Of every precious thing."

II. Now, secondly, let us consider the assertion that all things combine to produce in Christians conformity to Christ. It is a broad and unqualified statement, and marks the complete transformation which Christianity works in our conception of life. Life itself, so far as its outward framework is concerned, remains exactly as before. It develops anxieties and reverses, sickness and sorrow, loss and disappointment. These things and many more are hard to bear. We call them "the ills that flesh is heir to." They seem to impoverish and oppress life, to be part of that long process of assault,

and battery by which we are worn down and finally brought to the dust. But Christianity shows us all these things subjected to a will that regulates and guides them so as to subserve its own purpose. They do not come by chance, nor do they operate without control. The order and sequence in which they come, the extent of their duration, the weight and, so to speak, the angle of their incidence, are wisely and unerringly adjusted. Each contributes in its own imperceptible, it may be, but nevertheless effectual way to the desired result. And it is just because we lose sight of this result and fail to realise it in its fulness, we often find the words of my text so hard to believe.

When some sudden catastrophe swallows up a man's fortune, and leaves him shivering on the brink of beggary, we are apt to ask with incredulous lips how that can be for good. When sickness comes and all our days are resolved into a simple effort of endurance, or death plucks the sweetest flowers that ever shed its fragrance on our home, is it possible to accept the stroke as a blessing in disguise? Without a struggle certainly not, and not even thus always at first. "~~No affliction~~," says the Apostle <sup>writes of the only truly blessed</sup> (also without anything to qualify the words)—"~~No affliction~~ <sup>for the present</sup> seemeth to be <sup>not</sup> joyous, but grievous: ~~nevertheless~~ <sup>yet</sup> afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them who <sup>have been</sup> ~~are~~ exercised thereby." Men are not made of cast iron, and when they become Christians they do not cease to be men. They become better and truer men than they were before, and more sensitive to all that touches the heart and hopes of humanity. Christ Himself did not always submit without a struggle. Once, at all events, it was with strong cryings and tears. But if we only embrace the end of God's discipline we

shall see that those very things which we should naturally consider the purest disasters, working nothing but evil and woe, may bring about precisely the opposite effects. Had Christ no trials? Was not His life one prolonged throb of suffering? Did He not voluntarily forego the very things which the world counts the best? The desertion of friends, the contradiction of sinners, love repaid with hate, patience with insult, longsuffering mistaken for weakness, and nailed with ribald malefactors to the Cross—all these were ingredients in the cup which His Father gave Him to drink. And did they work anything but good? Is the Christ less glorious because His hands are pierced and His brow was crowned with thorns? Is He any the less the great Consoler and Benefactor of the world because in all our afflictions He was afflicted? Nay: "He learned obedience by the things that He suffered." And because "He humbled Himself, and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross, God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name that is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." And so, brethren, as there was nothing in the life of our Lord but ultimately ministered to His glory, and that life embraced all the experience of humanity in its wide and ample range, so there will be nothing in your life that will not make you liker and bring you nearer to Him, if only you receive it in His spirit and read it with the same trustful eye. Listen to that flood of music that at the touch of a single hand rolls from a hundred pipes. It may at first confuse, overwhelm, astonish you. But amid all the various and apparently conflicting sounds, a practised ear can detect the expression of one tumultuous emotion, or it may be the melody of a simple air, that,



divested of its manifold accompaniments, might be played upon an oaten stop. And in like manner if you suffer your life to be controlled and ordered by the gracious hand of God, there will run through it the harmony of a Divine purpose, conforming you to the image of His Son.

III. But, thirdly, let us look a little more closely at the condition on which this working together of all things for good is based. The condition is—that we love God. St. Paul might simply have written, “We know that all things work together for good to us,” that is, to us Christians. And the fact that he describes Christians by this particular characteristic, out of many others which he might have chosen, indicates its special propriety to the subject in hand. What this is becomes apparent on a little consideration. It is plain that all things do not work together for good because of any peculiar virtue in the things themselves, nor simply because of the time and manner of their occurrence. Heat and moisture, light and air, are all necessary for the maturing of the crops, and these may be distributed with the most consummate wisdom in the procession of the seasons. But, if the soil be poor and insufficient, or foul with weeds, the harvest will be thin and disappointing, if it does not utterly fail. So the discipline of life may be all administered with the most beneficent design; but, if there be no corresponding receptivity in us, it will do us no good. The skill and patience of the teacher may be beyond reproach, and his methods unimpeachable; but if the pupil persists in being lazy and disobedient these will not in themselves make him a scholar. He must to some extent make the aim of his teacher his own, and co-operate with him, in order to receive the full benefit of his tuition. Hence,

St. Paul says we must love God if God's providence is to do us good or conform us to Christ—that is, we must be at one with Him in seeking the fulfilment of His purpose. Our will must be in harmony with His. The goal to which he is leading us must also be the goal which we ourselves have chosen, and we must resolutely refuse whatever withdraws us from its pursuit.

But there is more than this implied in loving God. It describes that attitude towards Him in which our filial relationship attains its most confiding and affectionate expression, that clinging to God as a child clings to his father, especially at the approach of peril, and which, even at the time of chastisement, never dreams of questioning His love. And there is much need of this. For though we may know the fact we often cannot understand the fashion, in which all things are to work together for our good. In numberless instances this will be almost entirely hidden from our eyes. We cannot fully comprehend the way of God's procedure. We are ignorant of much about our own character which is open and manifest to Him. We cannot foresee what the effect might have been of an act or an experience which we had proposed to ourselves, and which seems to us to have been mysteriously hindered. Still less can we comprehend the variety and infinitude of the Divine resources, how He can reach results by routes that seem to lead in the opposite direction, and bring out of the strangest combinations the most harmonious end. In short, we cannot discern the perspective of life or see clearly the relation in which each part stands to the whole. And hence we must take much on trust. We must cling to God in the dark, remembering that He "leads the blind by a way that they know not," and yet that ~~this~~ way is sure to be

*It's*



the right one. In all times of distress and doubtfulness, in all seasons of bewilderment and bitterness, when the night seems to have settled down upon you, and there is no sign of the coming day, yet hold fast the conviction—"We know that all things work together for good." "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." It is your Father that has sent the trial. It is your Father that appoints the hour and power of your tribulation. "Whom the Father loveth, He chasteneth." And He is watching you through it all; His heart is with you. He fain would spare you if He could. He longs that "the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, may be found unto praise and honour and glory." And see! the darkness is passing, the shadow of death is turning into the morning. "Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God."

And lest at any time you should be shaken in your conviction of the blessed end of God's dealing, by the fear that you do not satisfy the condition of loving Him, then remember that this love is not so much a feeling as a posture or habit of the soul. It is that clinging to Him of which I have just been speaking. And if He should seem too distant to be grasped, too remote to be touched even by the hem of His garment, so that you cry, "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat!" Then still further remember that the essence of love is obedience: "This is love, that we walk after His commandments." And be assured that if you seek to follow His guidance, and submit yourself to His hand, if you are willing to be made what He wishes you to become, and to be fashioned after the image

of Christ, He will make good His word to you, and perfect that which concerneth you. "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord. His going forth is prepared as the morning, and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth."

The closing words of the verse—"to them who are the called according to His purpose"—are not a limitation of the previous definition, "to them that love God." They rather contain the Divine guarantee for the working of all things together for their good. Love to God is the inward condition, without which, as we have seen, it cannot take place. But God's own purpose is its external cause, which secures that nothing shall prove an exception to the rule, but that everything shall be brought into subjection to His good pleasure. This purpose can never waver, or be deflected from its goal. For it is the purpose of Him who worketh all things according to the counsel of His will. Nor is it dependent on us for its stability and permanence. We may lose sight of it, and fail to trace it, but it will not vanish for our shortsightedness. We may sometimes forget it, and start in hot pursuit of what will lead us far from its pathway, but some sudden fall, or sharp stroke of correction, will awaken us to our folly, and lead us back to Him whom we have sinfully forsaken. The world, indeed, will always move along, supremely sceptical of any purpose superior to its own. It will always smile, if it does not mock at the idea of everything combining to minister to our good. For to it matter is greater than spirit, nature than man. And nature, with its vast revolutions and inexorable laws, seems calmly indifferent to the distressful agonies of the human heart.

The tendencies of our time in special, present a hard front of resistance to God, and evil may break up and ruin for a season our painful strivings after good. But if in the hot rush and eager scramble around us, it is difficult to believe that God's purpose can thread its way securely through the chaos, and accomplish all it contemplates in individual lives, then consider how in the past it has realised itself, in spite of even greater obstacles, and more hostile conditions. Slowly it wrought through millenniums strewn with the wreck of empires, and labouring with countless cycles of change, till in the fulness of time it flowered in Jesus Christ—holy, harmless, and undefiled. Down through the ages, amid eras of persecution and eclipses of darkness, it has thrown out its pure blossoms in the night, in saintly lives and Christlike characters. And to-day, among the foetid misery of our crowded towns, with the degrading squalor and unrelieved monotony of their sunless days, where everything seems to have conspired to extirpate virtue and eradicate the very roots of goodness, you still find this wondrous purpose becoming manifest, in purity that bears no stain, or penitence that struggles towards it, or in high devoted souls that "scorn delights and live laborious days," to bind up the broken hearts, and make some "sunshine in a shady place." And this same purpose, brethren, will fulfil itself in you, in whom the call of God has awakened filial obedience and the love that clings to Him. Lift up your hearts, for "Behold! your redemption draweth nigh." "He will not fail, nor be discouraged till He have set judgment in the earth, and the isles do wait for His law." He will not fail till every one of those who have trusted Him and committed themselves to His care, is with Him where

He is, and shares the beauty of His perfect grace. As, far up among the mountains, that are swept by the winter storms, and resound with the crash of the avalanche, you will find the blue gentian scattering its loveliness, or the soft petals of the edelweiss pushing their way through the chill snow-drift, so God can keep His children in the hollow of His hand, and the troubles of earth will only root them more firmly in Him, till in due season they wear the white flower of a blameless life. "For we know that all things work together for good to them that love Him, to them who are the called according to His purpose." And "He is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. Now, therefore, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."



XVIII.

*THE GOSPEL, A SAVOUR OF LIFE OR OF DEATH.*

“But thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savour of His knowledge in every place. For we are a sweet savour of Christ unto God, in them that are being saved, and in them that are perishing ; to the one a savour from death unto death ; to the other a savour from life unto life.”—2 COR. ii. 14-16 (R.V.).

## XVIII.

### *THE GOSPEL, A SAVOUR OF LIFE OR OF DEATH.*

THIS abrupt thanksgiving, which introduces a long parenthesis into the opening part of the Epistle, was not due, as some have supposed, to the success of St. Paul's preaching, either in Macedonia or Troas. It was prompted by his recollection of the tidings that assured him of the beneficial effects of his First Epistle. That Epistle had been taken—or at least immediately followed—by Titus, with instructions to see its orders obeyed, and bring back word of the results; while he himself, after a stay of some weeks at Ephesus, should advance northward by easy stages to Troas, cross to Macedonia, and so travel southward to Corinth. His departure from Ephesus was probably hastened by the riot of the silversmiths, and the journey that succeeded was attended with feelings of peculiar depression. "Possibly the recollection of the recent tumult still weighed upon his mind, possibly some new conspiracy against his life had been discovered on the road; but his language rather implies that the gloom and misery that oppressed him were greatly enhanced, if not occasioned, by his anxiety about the reception of his Epistle at Corinth. His bodily constitution, never strong, was bowed down almost to the grave by this complication



of sorrow, and Titus was the only one who, at that conjuncture could minister balm to his wounded spirit. His first hope of meeting him was at Troas. Thither vessels came from the opposite coast, and thither therefore Titus might already have arrived. But, owing to some unlooked-for delay, his hopes were disappointed ; and so sorely did the disappointment fall upon his heart, that even his Apostolic labours lost their charm, and he hurried by sea to Neapolis, and thence to Philippi. There, amid the familiar scenes of his former journey, he paused on his route. But still distrustful and oppressed, his 'flesh had no rest; he was troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears,' till at last the long expected day arrived. Titus came, and came with tidings—not indeed wholly satisfactory, but sufficiently cheering to relieve him at once from the chief load of care that had weighed upon his spirit."

Looking back on that critical time, and recalling the crowd of emotions that filled his heart, St. Paul is led to survey the whole of his past Apostolic experience. In spite of its perils, its hours of suspense and almost agonizing anxiety, his course had been one of continual triumph. Its difficulties had only magnified his ascendancy over them. His fears and extremities had only given occasion for a more striking display of the power that had lifted him above them all. For it was not his own strength that had given him the victory, nor his own resources that had equipped him for his warfare. He is careful to ascribe, as he always does, the whole direction and success of his ministry to God. He had been but an instrument for the manifestation of His grace, and the effectual diffusion of the energy of His Gospel.

The words in which this truth is expressed were

suggested by one of the most imposing spectacles of the ancient world, though this is somewhat obscured by a slight inaccuracy in our Authorized Version. The word which is rendered "causeth us to triumph" ought to be translated "leadeth us in triumph;" and the image before the mind of the Apostle is the triumphant entry of a Roman general, who, after some victorious campaign, has returned to the capital laden with spoils. The civic dignitaries met him at the gate. The long vista of the sacred way that led to the Temple of Jupiter—the most venerable spot in the imperial city—was lined with crowds of spectators. The route was strewn with flowers and adorned with various devices. The doors of the temples were flung wide open, and from innumerable altars clouds of incense were wafted into the streets. There also fragrant spices were burnt till the air was filled with the rarest perfumes. As the stately procession advanced, with its troops of prisoners and trains of waggons, a shout of universal joy rent the air. It was the moment when the proud and boastful confidence of the people tasted its most exquisite gratification, when the wine of their exultation was quaffed to the dregs. But amid all the rejoicing and smoking of incense, there were some whose hearts were full of ominous forebodings. The captives, who enhanced the glory and lustre of the victor, were destined to taste the severity of their masters. Arrived at the temple which marked the termination of the route, some were mercilessly slain, to show how Rome rewarded her opponents, while some were spared, to remember what they owed to her haughty generosity. To the one the pageantry of the spectacle with its far-spreading odours was a savour of death unto death, to the others a savour of life unto

life. So, says St. Paul, has it been with us. God has led us about "from place to place in the train of His triumph to celebrate His victory over the enemies of Christ." By us He has made known the reality of His might, *in* us has been seen the evidence of His conquest; and wherever we have gone there we have been a living testimony to His prevailing prowess. Just as the prisoners paraded through the streets of Rome showed that the victorious general had been engaged in no sham warfare, so we have been led from place to place as proofs of the saving vigour of the Gospel of His grace.

If this explanation of his words is correct, St. Paul, you will observe, describes the success of his labours by a figure which represents him as led like a captive. But this only illustrates the humility which was always so conspicuous a feature in his character. He assigns the first and prominent place to God. It was God who, in the Person of Christ, had entered into conflict with the enemies of man, and having spoiled principalities and powers, had made a show of them openly. He—the Apostle—had done nothing but bear witness to *His* victory; and, freed from the servitude of sin, submit to be held in the bonds of His love and be led in the service of perfect liberty. Moreover, this deep truth underlies the whole—that our true triumphs only begin after God has first triumphed over us, after He has brought us to follow in the order of His progress, and so to testify to the riches of His grace. He had begun His triumph over the Apostle when He had changed him at Damascus from a bitter foe to a faithful servant, and there also the triumphs of St. Paul himself had commenced. Every service he had rendered since, every hardship he had suffered, every deed he had dared, had only attested

how thorough and complete that victory had been. And so it must be with us all. So long as we prevail and carry everything before us, so long are we really suffering defeat. We are straining our efforts to win inferior and worthless prizes, while we allow the only good ones to remain unsought. And attainment in such a case is worse than failure. It confirms the soul in its false pursuit, hardens it into a habit of selfishness, and, while deceiving our hearts with the plaudits of a triumph, is rivetting upon us the fetters of the slave. Only when God checks us in our wilful course and shows us the folly of our doings ; only when He baffles us and brings us to see through the ruin and dim perplexity of our defeated aims the nobler purposes He has called us to embrace, do we begin to master our worst foes and win our truest victories.

But the main thought of the passage is different from this, and is thrown into relief by one of those sudden shiftings in the management of his metaphor which are not uncommon in the writings of St. Paul. We have seen how he has pictured his triumphant career as a preacher of Christ by comparing himself to a captive in the train of a conqueror. But though on the whole his Apostolic labours had been followed by the most satisfactory fruits, there had been much to damp enthusiasm and furnish a dark background to his grateful thoughts. The effects of his message had not been uniform. It had acted with a twofold result. Its saving of some had involved the ruin of others. Even in Corinth it had been so. The troubles there had not been quelled without alienation and loss. If the majority had yielded at his reproof, yet, doubtless, there were not a few who had been strengthened in their obstinacy or even precipitated into revolt. Accordingly by a slight change

in the figure he is now no longer a prisoner gracing the triumphal procession, but a bearer of incense, who flings from his censer as he goes along the odours of sweet smelling spice. Now also the captives are merely regarded as those who have once been in arms against the conqueror, and to whom the incense that proclaims his triumph, carries, as it were, the sentence of death or the announcement of the gift of life.

It is to this double working of the Gospel I wish especially to draw your attention. And you will notice first, that in every instance one or other of the effects which are here described follows its proclamation. The Apostle does not say they are produced only in a certain number of cases. He tells us that none who hear it are left exactly as it finds them. They cannot, even if they wish, withdraw themselves wholly from its influence. If they do not receive it, then they reject it; if they do not believe it, then they deny it; if they are not moved and roused into penitence and faith, then they are sealed in their deadness and indifference. They must either be made better or they must inevitably be made worse.

It would be easy to show you that this is not a result peculiar to the Gospel or fastened upon it by an arbitrary arrangement. You cannot reject any truth whatever without suffering in consequence. You either confirm your incapacity to receive what is true, or you lose by the absence of the power which the truth in question would have bestowed. And the more vital, the more closely identified it is with our highest interests, the more severe the consequence of its rejection becomes. Now the Gospel has this peculiarity—that it touches the deepest point in our nature, and affects our character more profoundly than anything else can do.

It does not deal with passing phases of our life merely, nor with the accidents of our environment : it bears directly upon our eternal welfare. It speaks with a clear, authoritative voice, resolving its whole message into one supreme offer whose terms can hardly be misunderstood. And as every truth carries with it a certain authority just because it is truth ; and the authority becomes more distinct the higher the truth is ; so in the Gospel—which is the highest truth of all, corresponding most entirely to the sum of human needs, and thus attesting the oneness of its origin with that of the humanity which it has come to redeem—so in the Gospel, I say, there is felt to be an authority, unique of its kind, and a disobedience in its rejection which is also marked by the deepest dye of guilt. ] But though this authority is felt, as I believe, by all to whom it appeals at some moment or other of their lives, the feeling is apt to be transient. Every man indeed who rejects Christ knows that he is doing something quite different from anything else he has ever done or can do. He may not understand clearly why this should be so, and his conviction about the matter may not be very acute ; but there is a lurking consciousness of the peculiarity of his act. And this haunts him, and is never very far from rising into a throb of pain, unless his conscience has become seared by a determined opposition to the light. But there are many who hear the Gospel for years without ever realising that it brings a message demanding a decided and hearty response. They have known and listened to it so long, it does not occur to them that they have anything else to do. The only decision which they feel called upon to make is the decision between continuing to hear and ceasing to do so. For as they are often tempted to withdraw from all



public waiting upon God, resistance to this temptation presents itself as the only victory which they have to gain. Again, there are others who identify the preacher so completely with his message they never imagine that in accepting or rejecting it, they are doing anything more than accepting or rejecting him. And this is a feeling which, though carried to excess when allowed to go so far, has quite a legitimate basis. At times, St. Paul very sharply distinguishes between himself and his message. It is a treasure borne about in an earthen vessel. It is a mystery of which he only acts as the steward, or seed which he scatters abroad, but the growth and fruitfulness of which depend upon God. But at other times he identifies himself expressly with it as he does here, for he does not say our preaching is the savour of life unto life, or of death unto death, but we ourselves are. And this arose from his entire surrender to the power of the Gospel. It possessed him. It seized and consumed his whole nature. His life was entirely absorbed and expended in making it known. The two were so completely coincident it was almost impossible to separate between them. You could not distinguish any personal or selfish aim. You could not say that he ever did or thought of anything else but the simple proclamation of the truth. The whole man went forth in it without the smallest particle of reserve, and it was no exaggeration therefore to allege that men's treatment of him and their treatment of his Gospel were one and the same. The two were inseparable, and so far they stood or fell together. And the very nature of the ministry makes it inevitable that this should always to some extent be the case. It is true our own inconsistencies may often make a difference between ourselves and the message we deliver. Men

may set us aside, and yet they may accept it. They may honour it for its own sake without regard to the claims or character of the man who expounds it. But as a rule the majority of our hearers will always closely associate the preacher with the truth which he preaches. They judge it by the expression it receives in his character and life. If there are serious blemishes and inconsistencies there they will mingle with it as discordant notes mingle with a harmony. They will render it unwelcome or positively painful to hear. Yet for all this it is necessary to keep ever in the forefront the difference between the preacher and the message entrusted to his charge. You do not assemble simply to hear his word, you come to hear the Word of God. And you must not allow the form in which he clothes it, or the man himself, to prevent your recognizing the source from which it comes. It is not with his opinions you have to deal, nor to his invitations you have to reply. There is a greater and a higher than he who speaks through him and makes Himself audible in his voice and appeals. Beware lest you cover up your rejection of Christ under the feint of a difference from His servant who sets Him forth, or a critical dislike to his treatment of his subject or style of address. The longer your conscience remains unawakened the deeper will your slumber become. The longer you withdraw yourself from actual contact with the truth, the longer you evade facing its demands by an indolent indifference or an uncomfortable suspicion that they involve a sacrifice which you are unwilling to make, the more hopeless will your condition become. You will grow confirmed in a certain attitude and habit of hearing which it will be daily more difficult to break. The temptations, claims, and harassments of the world



will thicken around you. And even to you who have not decidedly rejected Christ, but only neglected or ignored Him, His Gospel will be the savour of death unto death.

But let us look more directly at the alternative. To some the Gospel is a savour of life unto life. It brings a message of forgiveness and release. It finds us led like captives by the resistless power of sin. The sentence of death is upon us, and we are impotent to elude the strong grasp of justice, or escape the doom which becomes more imminent with every passing day. We make desperate efforts at atonement, but conscience refuses to recognise their sufficiency. We struggle to obliterate the past by strenuous attempts at well-doing, but it insists in obtruding through the thin crust that overlays it, and shakes our confidence to the ground. We try to forget that, like the Roman captives in the triumph, we are steadily approaching the dreadful moment of decision. We endeavour to beguile our attention by the way, to lull our senses to slumber, to persuade ourselves that our fear may after all be vain, or some means of escape may suddenly appear ; but here, too, we play a hollow and delusive part. Could the prisoners—with the manacles about their wrists, with the rumble of the triumphal cars and the shouting of the multitudes resounding in their ears, with the incense filling the very air they breathed, with every sense in fact assailed by reminders of their fate—could they forget whither they were being dragged with downcast and dejected mien ? And if they did, if they dreamed away the painful hour by thoughts that wandered among other scenes, did not every moment still bring them nearer to their doom, and mercilessly shorten the time of their immunity ? And when at last they stood on the summit of the steep

ascent that marked the halting-place of the jubilant procession, when they saw the paraphernalia of death, and realized its awful imminence to the full, how infinite the relief to those who were apprised of the mercy of their conquerors, and found themselves withdrawn from the very jaws of darkness! One can fancy how the shock and revulsion of feeling would be almost overpowering at first, how it would take some time before the respited prisoners could realize that the peril was over, that life—with its sunshine and shadow, with its endearments and achievements—still lay smiling before them and beckoning them on. Even so is the message of the Gospel. It brings a royal offer of forgiveness to souls shuddering on the brink of doom. It brings redemption from a captivity galling to bear, and with no prospect before it but a gloomy plunge into despair. It brings the joy of deliverance, of a life restored, of a future reopened, of hope, and strength, and a peace that composes the deepest troubles of the soul. Or if it does not bring this in its full consciousness, it brings at least the sense of a new life, the sense of waking out of a dream, an unreal and false state of existence, which would certainly have allured us on to destruction. Has it been to you, brethren, a savour in any sense resembling this? Has it made you aware of dangers from which it has delivered you? Has it brought you a sense of release from something which, though you may not be able to define it, you feel to be too terrible to be expressed? Has it given you a sense of enlargement, of freedom from haunting fear, from a settled inward disquiet, which bound and oppressed your life, and cramped your liberty of action? Has it proved such that you can say you owe to it “the life which you now live,” that all your hopes and desires are due to its

influence, and that were it taken away there would be nothing for you but blank and infinite despair? If not, then what is the other alternative? You are moving on, each step shortening your course, each day bringing you so much nearer the final reckoning. Your fetters are upon you. You are getting used to the shameful insignia of capture, to the slouching habits of the slave. You have arranged a compromise with your sin, and agreed quietly to submit to its sway, that you may not be troubled by reopening unpleasant questions, or disturbing the settled habits of your life. You have been brought face to face with the message of the Gospel. You have had the offer of Christ urged and pressed upon you. You have been assured of His willingness to receive you, of the patience of His love, of the strength and infinite reach of His redeeming grace. But you have hung back, you have put it aside, you have treated it as irrelevant, or as something you had made up your mind about long ago, and which you are not disposed to reconsider now. And what then? Suppose some sullen captive, on receiving the tender of his victor's grace on the proud summit of the Roman Capitol, had refused or scouted it with insulting scorn? What would have stood between him and his doom? The one prospect of release rejected—a prospect he had no right to expect, a prospect graciously and spontaneously presented—a righteous indignation would have hurried him to his fate. Swift, eager, and relentless would have fallen the stroke of the executioner's sword. But thanks be to God, here the parallel, at least partially, fails. We can find analogies that express with sufficient force the absolute justice and equity of God. We can see and acknowledge, if we cannot measure, the extent of His power. And though His

wisdom be past finding out, it presses itself upon us in innumerable ways at which we cannot but wonder and adore. But when you come to describe or think about His mercy all human analogies—our very thoughts themselves—are utterly at fault. There is nothing to be fitly compared with it in the heart of man or in the institutions of society. It is of this that God Himself emphatically says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” He repudiates, as it were, all comparison between our conceptions of His grace and what it really is. It seeks out the prodigal, abandoned by the world, and weeping in the bitterness and desolation of his soul. It recovers the transgressor, though he has fallen again and again, till human patience and resource have long since left him to his fate. It accepts repeated insults, and acts of contumelious scorn, and abates nothing of its fulness, its freeness, its infinite pity. And though you have rejected it, and may be rejecting it now, though you have misjudged the love of God and the grace of Christ, yet between you and the death that must otherwise befall it still stops and opens out to you its entreating arms. Will you not come—come that you may have the joy and sweetness of a forgiven heart; come that you may taste and see how good the Lord is; come that you may find that message of His which you have felt to be dogging you like a dark shadow, and to which you have been giving an angry and irritated rebuff, to be indeed a savour of life unto life? For the mercy of God is in the heavens; His faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. For the excellence of His lovingkindness the children

of men put their trust under the shadow of His wings. Only if you persist in rejecting that lovingkindness, and harden yourself into an attitude of final impenitence against it, will the due results of your refusal be allowed to overtake you, and that which was designed to become a savour of life unto life prove to be a savour of death unto death.

THE END.

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